Darius Hinks

MEPHISTON

Blood of Sanguinius

WARHAMMER
40,000
Darius Hinks
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Blood of Sanguinius

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MEPHISTON

Blood of Sanguinius

Darius Hinks

BLACK LIBRARY

WARHAMMER 40,000

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

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

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

the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Blood Angels

Mephiston, Chief Librarian; formerly Battle-Brother Calistarius

Epistolary Gaius Rhacelus, Librarian; Mephiston's equerry; member of Quorum Empyrric

Lexicanium Lucius Antros, Librarian; newly appointed master of the Orbicular Tower

Codicier Peloris, Librarian

Captain Vatrenus, Fourth Company captain; member of Quorum Empyrric

Sergeant Seriphus, Fourth Company Tactical Marine; sergeant of Squad Seriphus

Sergeant Hestias, Fourth Company Tactical Marine; sergeant of Squad Hestias

Battle-Brother Mandacus, Fourth Company Tactical Marine

Battle-Brother Casali, Fourth Company Sanguinary Priest

Battle-Brother Gallus, Fourth Company Techmarine

Scholiast Imola, Blood thrall; member of Quorum Empyrric

Scholiast Dimitra Ghor, Blood thrall; senior scribe of the Orbicular Tower

Aphek, Blood thrall; Mephiston's personal chirurgeon

Ecclesiarchy

Confessor Zin, Accensor Prophetic of the Luminous Throne

Arch-Cardinal Dravus, Proconsul of Divinus Prime; Lord-Ministrant

Cardinal Vectis, Dravus' second-in-command

Prester Kohath, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime

Prester Brennus, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime

Prester Cyriak, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime

Father Adamis Orsuf, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime

The Unbegotten Prince, Prophet of the Enlightened

Livia, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime

'General' Dharmia, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime; follower of Livia

Abderos, Ecclesiarch on Divinus Prime; follower of Livia

Order of the Hallowed Gate

Saint Ophiusa, Adepta Sororitas, canoness of Volgatis

Sister Superior Melitas, Adepta Sororitas, Seraphim stationed at Volgatis

Astra Militarum

Captain Hesbon, Commanding officer of the Volscan Dragoons

Kruk, Commander of the Vharun 12th

Lieutenant Myos, Trooper of the Vharun 12th

Prion, Trooper of the Vharun 12th

Sergeant Athor, Trooper of the Vharun 12th

PROLOGUE

They circled in the deep: two sorcerers, blooded and drowned beneath a diamond sea. Their quest for knowledge had led them to the unknowable. They had peeled themselves from the bones of reality and become lost, tumbling towards oblivion, clinging to a dizzying truth. They were a moment away from eternity, a victory away from omnipotence. If one could best the other they would be free, born anew in the white heat of change.

The game was almost done.

Their duel was centuries old but even now, as they reached the endgame, they would not relent. Their magic was spent. Their familiars banished. Their grimoires burned. Their armies ground into dust. But they fought on with sinew, knuckle and claw, howling as they sank into a glittering abyss, drunk on the promise of its power.

The sorcerers reached the seabed, a blinding mirror of silver, and lunged, hacking at each other's ruined armour. One was clad in gleaming white, the plates warped into ivory whorls by the fury of the battle. Rather than eyes, he viewed his enemy through a single, fist-sized sapphire, embedded deep in his forehead. The jewel was gilded and clasped, a lidded eye, cold and glimmering with rage. The second sorcerer wore voluminous robes, a storm of azure that flowed from her skin, girdled by a belt of fire.

As the sorcerers fought, their blood formed patterns in the sea – coral-bright flowers that spiralled around them as they began to die. The patterns became glimpses of madness: an inconceivable architecture of jumbled physics, a labyrinth of impossible colour.

Their blows grew weaker and the sorcerers' breath slipped away, robbed and refracted by the diamond sea. Then, as their vision dimmed, the blossoms of warp-fire flashed brighter, searing into their minds, halting them at the last threshold of death. Magic and dreams coalesced, forming a single, hooded figure, drifting towards them on the crystalline currents. It was a frail-looking monk, dressed in simple robes. Where his face should have been there was an avian skull, jutting out from his hood like a pale claw.

'We dream, dreaming, dreamed,' he said, speaking without opening his beak, his voice a confusing polyphony of tones. 'But if infinity comes, came, or ever was, what will we do? What have you ever offered that you could truly give?'

The sorcerers rushed towards him, rapacious grins on their faces.

'*I* am the one,' rumbled the white-armoured sorcerer, struggling to speak, his vocal cords shredded. 'Pick me. I will be your most loyal servant. I will be your greatest student.'

'He's a fool,' gasped the second sorcerer. 'Choose me. I have learned so many things that he could never even conceive of. He knows nothing of true change. He could never understand the brightness of the flame. But I do, my lord, I do!'

The monk waved for silence. Rather than an arm, the limb was a snake, coiled and tense, eager to strike.

'You showed and will show that you have shown such promise. You have reached the beginning at the end. But I will despair of you in the past and I despaired of you in the future. Your strategies are obvious. Your wars will be dull. Your games were led, leading and will lead to nothing.'

The sorcerers fell silent and withdrew into the darkness, exchanging confused glances.

'I gave and will give you a final chance,' said the monk. 'You frittered the legions you will be given and waste your gifts on pointless wars, but I will grant you a new arena.' A note of amusement entered the monk's voice. 'I will steal you a world of clever fools, an unruffled pool, waiting

to be disturbed.'

'My lord,' began the one-eyed sorcerer. 'We will not bore you again. All we need is–'

'A prize won and worth winning,' said the monk. 'And you shall have it. Whichever one of you brings, bring, brought me the Blade Petrific shall become my acolyte and lived long enough to learn the *true* wisdom of the flame.'

The one-eyed sorcerer opened his mouth to reply but the monk was gone and a strange landscape had opened up beneath them. They fell, and as they dropped, reality rushed back into view. They saw a world of spires and bones, a planet-sized tomb, gleaming with promise.

The sorcerers smiled as they parted, eager for the game ahead.

The Wars of Sanctitude entered their ninth decade and the Cronian Sector remained trapped – mired in a stygian swamp of superstition and misbelief. It became impossible to record even a fraction of the atrocities perpetrated in the God-Emperor's name. The Cronian Sector became a byword for mystery and deceit but there were few on Terra who could honestly say which of the warring cults were heretical and which were ferocious defenders of the faith. There was no logic to the wars and no sign of an end. As their most precious relics slipped deeper into the morass, on the brink of being lost, the senior prelates of the Adeptus Ministorum petitioned the High Council of Terra for aid. They were refused. Brutal as they were, the Wars of Sanctitude were only a single note of pain, set against the great opera of screams that filled the stars. The Ruinous Powers were extending their reach into every corner of the galaxy and the bickering of a few priests barely warranted a footnote on the council's order of business. It seemed that the Cronian Sector would simply fall from view – another unmarked tragedy of the 41st millennium. Then, divine providence appeared to intervene. In the halls of a fortress-monastery, on the Blood Angels' home world of Baal, a pair of blood-filled eyes turned towards the most obscure Cardinal World in the Cronian Sector, Divinus Prime. Beneath the soaring walls of Arx Murus, The Lord of Death heard a voice, calling to him from across the void.

– Prolocutor Obath, *The Wars of Sanctitude, Volume Two.*

CHAPTER ONE

Thermia V
Six miles south of the Raumath Docks

Thermia was a world of ghosts and half-seen things; a vaporous corpse, shrouded in a winding sheet of fine black powder. Lucius Antros had come here in search of a vision, in thrall to a prediction, but Thermia had seeped into his mind, clouding his thoughts. What had seemed so clear in the Arx Angelicum now seemed absurd.

On Baal he had dreamed that he, and he alone could save Mephiston. He had seen them fighting together beside a vast, shattered fist – a ruin, surrounded by monsters. He had been sure that the Chief Librarian was on the brink of disaster. The idea seemed ridiculous now, but Antros could not let it go. He had to find the ruined fist. He had to know if it was real. He had to know what it meant.

He came to a halt and peered through the billowing ash, staring at movement up ahead. At first he struggled to make out the shapes but then his augmented vision honed in on them, resolving the silhouettes into something recognisable: a group of human soldiers, heading towards him at a slow, exhausted plod. He flicked the safety off his bolt pistol and strode on to meet them. The dust worms had left half of Thermia's settlers insane. The evacuation force had spent almost as much time killing humans as rescuing them. They had escorted thousands to the Raumath

docks, readying them for evacuation, but others were so consumed by madness they had to be gunned down. As Antros approached the men he was quite prepared for either eventuality.

It was a group of shock troopers. They staggered to a halt as Antros loomed out of the soot clouds. The soldiers were clad in black fatigues and thick plates of flak armour. Their crested, iron helmets completely encased their heads, and their faces were hidden behind thermal imaging goggles and heavy, bulbous rebreathers. They looked like thick-jawed attack dogs, the best Thermia had to offer, but Antros could see they were as burned out as the rest of the planet. These veterans of an unwinnable war had watched their home die and it showed in their posture as they stumbled through the ash and embers. Their heads were hung low on exhaustion-rounded shoulders and their lasguns trailed behind them through the fumes. At the sight of Antros they dropped into combat stances and raised their guns.

'Who's that?' growled the leader, trying to disguise his fear with a gruff yell. He looked up at Antros' power-armoured bulk, his eyes narrowing behind the filthy lenses of his goggles.

Antros stared down at him and the eye-lenses of his helmet pulsed into life, daubing the fumes with two spots of crimson fire. He scoured the men's souls, searching for the scent of corruption, but found only grief and despair. 'I am Lexicanium Antros,' he replied, when he realised he might not have to kill them. 'I am a Blood Angel.'

The soldier glanced at his men, clearly at a loss for words.

'Make for the docks,' said Antros. 'The planet is lost.'

'Lost?' The trooper could not hide the emotion in his voice. At first Antros thought it was relief, but then, as the man looked at the ground, Antros realised it was shame. 'Then we really *are* defeated?'

'Nothing can defeat you,' replied Antros, 'apart from despair. Conquer that and the Emperor might reward you with a more worthy foe.'

The soldier's eyes widened and Antros thought that he might weep. Then he drew back his shoulders and stood upright, giving Antros a stiff salute. 'Forgive my manners. I'm Lieutenant Myos of the Vharun Twelfth.'

Antros nodded. 'My battle-brothers are surrounding your camp as we speak. Yours is the last manned outpost. We have evacuated everyone else. We all leave tonight.'

The men paled. They clearly understood what he meant: Thermia was beyond saving and must be destroyed.

'We were checking the camp perimeter,' said Myos, sounding dazed. 'We saw gunfire to the east. I guessed it was a relief force, but…' He shook his head. 'We were just returning to camp for a debriefing.'

Antros was no longer looking at the man. 'The battle for Thermia is over. It is time to leave. I was sent to check for sentries such as yourself. We will not leave good men behind if we can help it.'

What did you see? demanded the daemonic shape, striding towards him through a storm of ghosts.

Antros staggered, shocked by the violence of the vision. It filled his mind with more force than ever before. The same crimson eyes. The same murderous rage. The same crumbling, stone fist, rearing up from a scorched landscape. The same furious question.

What did you see?

He grasped his head, his cranium pounding. Then the vision faded and the voice was gone.

The men stared at him in confusion.

Antros lowered his hand from his face and glared at them. He nodded back the way they had come. There was a line across the horizon, just visible through the ash clouds. 'Did you travel near the forest?'

Myos nodded. 'General Kruk did not realise things were as dire as you say, but he knew we were surrounded. He sent us this way to scout the perimeter. We followed the edge of the forest until half an hour ago. Why?'

'There is an old ruined statue,' said Antros. 'A fist, jutting from the ground. Somewhere near here. Surrounded by burned tree stumps.'

Myos nodded. 'I know the place, my lord. It's not far. Near the old pit.'

Antros tried to steady his pounding hearts. 'Lead me there. I have to see it before I go. The fleet leaves at dawn.' He was talking more to himself than the soldiers. 'Tonight is my last chance.'

The men exchanged concerned glances, but Myos ordered them to make for the docks. Then he trudged back the way he had come, signalling for Antros to follow.

They waded on through the ash-drifts, the soldier struggling to keep pace with Antros' broad, powerful strides. After a while Antros spotted a

building up ahead. It was a squat, pugnacious-looking tower, constructed of battle-scarred ferrocrete and bristling with guns. As they crested a hill the rest of the camp came into view: more watchtowers, surrounding rows of blockhouses, all of it circled by trenches and razorwire.

On the far side of the camp he could see the flicker of lumens tracing across the ground. Captain Vatrenus and his squads of Tactical Marines were making their final sweep towards the shattered defence lines, scouring the fumes for signs of the enemy as they ordered the few remaining Guardsmen towards the docks. Antros frowned, knowing that he should be down there with them. He had done as ordered and found the only strays he could. Now he should go back, but the visions haunted him. They had filled his thoughts since the moment they landed on Thermia, growing more forceful with every day that passed. He *must* see the place before he returned to Baal.

'What's that?' said Myos, looking along the earthworks towards a dark smudge against the grey clouds. Antros adjusted his retinal lenses and drew the shape into focus. It was another group of Guardsmen, clad in the same black flak suits and helmets as Myos. There were about a dozen of them, huddled together for safety, all wearing straps of grenades and armed with oilcloth-shrouded lasrifles.

'Sergeant Athor's men,' said Myos. 'Why are they just sitting there?'

Antros had seen Mephiston's tactics many times since they landed and he understood what was about to happen. 'Bait,' he said, waving for Myos to keep his head down.

Beyond the distant group of Guardsmen there was a black wall of fir trees, marking the edge of the forest that blanketed most of the planet. It was here, beneath their branches that Thermia's vile parasites started to stir, smelling the brain matter of the stranded troopers. The Chief Librarian had named them sepolcrali, long before the Blood Angels even landed on Thermia, using the ancient Baalite word for creatures of the grave. It was clear that the name was significant to him, but nobody had the courage to ask him why.

Antros could not see the sepolcrali yet, but their hunting call was unmistakable: an eerie, metallic scraping, like blades being sharpened. After a few minutes, the sepolcrali emerged from the trees. They could almost have been mistaken for more flurries of ash flakes – pale,

serpentine shapes, coiling through the grey drifts. But Antros noticed how they would rise up at one end, tasting the air and searching for a scent. They had no face, or any other features for that matter. They were opalescent tubes, ten or eleven feet long, looping and undulating as they snaked across the ash mounds. Antros was reminded of the sandy shapes that roll through the shallows of oceans – tubular, featureless, inhuman.

Myos grabbed some magnoculars and watched the sepolcrali slip into view. Captain Vatrenus and his Tactical Marines were half a mile away and it was clear that they would not reach the Guardsmen before the sepolcrali did. 'We can't just leave them there,' hissed Myos.

'Wait,' said Antros.

The troopers on the ridge had seen them too. The sergeant barked an order and the men spread out along the earthworks, each dropping to one knee and shouldering his lasrifle. Antros could see the xenos more clearly now, unfurling themselves across the ash with a gentle, rippling motion. They were grotesque – billowing spirits, glittering in the moonlight. He could understand the tales of supernatural beings that had littered the battle reports. The sepolcrali looked like ghosts.

He felt Myos bristling with hatred for the creatures and concern for his brothers down below.

'Wait!' he repeated.

The sepolcrali were still a hundred yards or so away from the Guardsmen when the massacre began.

Myos cried out in surprise as Mephiston knifed down from the ash clouds. He was like a raptor, silent and lethal. He fell feet first, chin raised and eyes closed. He had the handle of his sword, Vitarus, pressed to his chest, as though he were a figure carved into a sarcophagus.

If the sepolcrali sensed his coming, they had no chance to react. Mephiston landed with an explosion of ash and immediately began to kill. He whirled through the pre-dawn glow, gliding easily amongst his foes as though clad in silk rather than heavy, ancient battleplate.

The sepolcrali recoiled and tried to flee but it was useless. Mephiston's sword sliced through their translucent flesh like smoke. The blade shone with the force of Mephiston's mind, blazing and flashing as it tore the ash worms apart. They died in spectacular fashion, bursting into glittering clouds that whipped away on the breeze. Antros had seen similar scenes

several times since the start of the campaign, but he still watched with unabashed awe. Mephiston looked like a terrible deity, fallen from the heavens to mete out the Emperor's wrath. As Mephiston whirled and parried, Antros muttered a prayer, thanking the Emperor for showing him the glory of this divine retribution. Then he noticed ranks of colossal figures emerging from the banks of ash – Captain Vatrenus' battle-brothers had reached the earthworks, storming through the darkness, bolters raised. Like the shock troopers, the Blood Angels had no need to fire. Only a few seconds had passed since Mephiston appeared, but he had already destroyed most of the sepolcrali.

'Wait,' hissed Lieutenant Myos. 'Prion!'

A wounded Guardsman had emerged from the tree line. He was much closer to the swarms of sepolcrali than Mephiston or any of the other Blood Angels.

Mephiston had his back to the trooper as he sliced open another of the monsters but Captain Vatrenus saw him and must have voxed the Chief Librarian, because he whirled around.

'Too late,' muttered Antros. He strode forwards and raised his staff.

Mephiston saw the danger too and summoned wings from the darkness, but the white shape had already reached the injured soldier.

The man saw the sepolcrali rushing towards him through the ash blizzard. He opened his mouth to scream and the creature formed into a narrow, dart-like shape that plunged straight down Prion's throat. It was a revolting sight, but Antros could not look away. It looked like Prion was vomiting in reverse. A quivering column of ash thundered down his throat, causing him to judder and spasm. He collapsed onto the ground, dead.

Mephiston swooped through the air, firing his pistol. Gouts of incandescent plasma thudded into the corpse, blasting chunks of flesh from the body and jolting it back across the moonlit hillside.

There were dozens more sepolcrali to kill but Mephiston was now far more concerned with shooting Prion's corpse.

A second wave of the things erupted from the ash in front of Mephiston, blocking his way. He killed them without raising a weapon – blasting them aside with a wave of his hand. They disintegrated into a cloud of embers, but hundreds more swirled into view, determined to keep Mephiston away from the corpse. He quickly became mired in a wall of glittering shapes.

The hillside lit up as a fusillade of bolter shots tore through the night. Captain Vatrenus' squads had dropped to their knees and opened fire, attempting to cut a path through the sepolcrali so that Mephiston could reach the body.

'Damn it,' muttered Antros, frustrated by the delay. He looked at Myos. 'Wait here. We may still have time when this is finished.'

'Finished?' gasped Myos. 'My lord, do you understand what the dust worms do?'

Antros gave no reply and waded down the slope.

As the Tactical Marines' firestorm lit up the scene, it revealed something grotesque: Prion's corpse had begun to quiver and mutate. Antros hissed in disgust as it lurched to its feet, already starting to bulge and tear. White light spilled from holes in the dead man's flesh and his head lolled backwards at a hideous angle, swinging from side to side as he began to run down the slope. The Guardsmen on the earthworks opened fire, howling curses. Flashes of las-fire slammed into the animated corpse, but the impact just made it swell and mutate all the more. It blossomed into a misshapen giant, thundering through the ash as the Guardsmen's shots grew wilder and more panicked.

Mephiston ripped through the enemy lines and was hurtling towards the giant, but he was too late. As the bloated corpse reached the earthworks, the men on the counterscarp tried to flee, but the giant moved with shocking speed and grabbed two of them in its enormous hands. It rocked back on its heels and threw them up the hill towards the rolling mass of sepolcrali.

The dust worms shot out to catch them, slicing into their bodies like spears.

Even before the men died, they began to tear and reform. Within seconds their animated corpses were thundering down the hill after the fleeing Guardsmen. The first of the giant revenants was still hurling other Guardsmen towards the storm of sepolcrali and, by the time Mephiston reached the earthworks, there were half a dozen of the lurching colossi. With every moment that passed they grew even larger. The one that had been Prion was already nearly twenty feet tall and still growing. It towered over even the largest buildings in the camp, swaying as though drunk. It swung its lolling head around, trying to spy other victims to toss to the

dust worms.

Klaxons blared, summoning Guardsmen from the blockhouses. Las-fire began lacerating the darkness, slicing chunks from the revenants, but the shots only seemed to add to their ghastly vigour.

Antros was still hundreds of yards away, but he raised his staff and summoned a blast of psychic fire from its charmed metal, hurling it into the sepolcrali as he ran.

Mephiston looked back at the Blood Angels and must have voxed them a command because they stopped rushing towards Mephiston and turned to face the storm of dust worms at the edge of the forest. They raced up the slope, closed on their foe and attacked with flamers, spewing columns of promethium at the sepolcrali. The flames enveloped the ranks of xenos, creating a blinding wall of fire that drove them back into the dead trees.

As Captain Vatrenus pushed back the ash worms, Mephiston placed himself directly in the path of the massive revenants. Six of the twitching behemoths were pounding towards the rows of blockhouses. Some of them were now thirty feet tall and the ground shuddered as they advanced. Mephiston looked tiny in comparison, but he waved away the Guardsmen that had approached until he stood alone. He shimmered with power, as though his body were a window onto an inferno. The light burned brightest in his sword and as he held the blade aloft it shone like a beacon, causing the revenants to stagger and shield their deformed faces.

Antros had never been so near the Chief Librarian in combat before and he saw that, even now, dwarfed by these monstrous corpses, Mephiston was utterly cold.

Antros' thoughts were interrupted by a sound from behind him. He whirled round, staff blazing, and saw Myos stumbling after him through the ash, refusing to sit by and watch as others fought his foes. He muttered a curse, then turned to look back at the fight.

The first of the giants had nearly reached Mephiston when the Chief Librarian calmly raised one hand and clenched it in a fist. The monster's head detonated. Ash, blood and brain matter poured down its chest as it dropped to its knees. The impact of its fall shattered windows and shook doors from their hinges. Without a brain, undead became simply dead. Mephiston stepped aside as it crashed onto its chest.

After the first monster hit the ground, Mephiston leapt onto its back and

launched himself at the second. The revenant reached for him with broken, deformed arms, but Mephiston summoned wings, swooping around the blow and plunging Vitarus into the giant's neck. The revenant staggered back and tried to shake him off, but Mephiston wrenched his blade through skin, bone and cartilage, decapitating the giant with one precise slash of his sword. Soldiers bolted for safety as the head crashed down, flattening a storehouse in an explosion of wood and roof tiles.

The third of the giants collapsed into a molten heap as Mephiston boiled its blood from within and the next two went the way of the first, their heads imploding as though hit by heavy artillery.

Mephiston fought calmly and with precision, his eyes half-lidded as he sliced the corpse giants apart.

As the fifth giant crashed to the ground, Mephiston saw that the sixth had taken its stolen body and fled for the forest. It was almost at the tree line, but Antros knew the vile thing would never make the trees.

Captain Vatrenus and his men had penned in most of the other worms and Antros saw his chance. 'The fight is over,' he said, turning to face the dazed-looking Guardsman. 'Lead me to the ruin.'

'What of your brothers, my lord?' asked Myos, nodding at the Blood Angels.

Antros shook his head. He knew that he was meant to seek this place alone. Vatrenus and the others were not part of the visions that had driven him here. He had seen the moment so many times. There was Mephiston, the daemonic foe and him – no one else.

The hillside lit up as a fusillade of bolter shots tore through the night. Both of Captain Vatrenus' squads had dropped to their knees and opened fire, joining Mephiston in the final slaughter.

As their firestorm lit up the scene, Antros followed Myos in the opposite direction, dashing for the nearby boundaries of the forest.

Myos sprinted through the trees, crashing through the ash-laden branches and trampling over charred roots. After only ten minutes or so, they reached a broad, ash-filled clearing, hundreds of feet wide and ablaze with moonlight. At the centre of the clearing was a stepped crater, spiralling down into the ground, coated with the same banks of smouldering ash that covered all of Thermia. Reaching up from the centre of the crater, rising way above the treetops, was the crumbling stone fist that haunted his

dreams.

What did you see?

The vision hit Antros with even greater force – the same hideous figure, the same whirling cloud of spirits, filling his head with flames and fury.

Momentarily blinded, he stumbled to a halt at the edge of the pit. Visions and prophecy were as familiar to him as anything in the physical world, but none had ever arrived with this violence. It was overwhelming. The vision faded and he hurried down the slope towards the ruins of a small temple.

He approached and looked inside. It was a tragic kind of place, with its shattered columns and exposed rafters but, as he peered through the half-open doors, he saw that it was abandoned. Apart from a few ash drifts that had forced their way inside, the building had been forgotten. Creepers had enveloped much of the stonework, smothering the wrecked remains of control panels and research equipment. The temple had been claimed by the forest.

Antros and Myos stepped inside. Most of the equipment had been smashed long ago but the upper parts of the walls were carved with beautiful friezes. The God-Emperor's hands spread over their heads, reaching out through the stars, spreading the seeds of his fledgling Imperium.

There was a noise outside the temple and Lieutenant Myos backed away from the door, his lasrifle raised.

'They're coming,' he said, his voice taut.

Antros dropped into a battle pose as huge numbers of sepolcrali rose from the pit, swarming up over the stone fist. Until now, Antros had only seen the sepolcrali attack in small groups, but this was a host. Hundreds of them were billowing up from the shadows, straining and sniffing at the scent of mortal flesh.

Antros spoke into his vox. 'Captain Vatrenus?' As he expected, the only reply was a howl of interference. Thermia's ash storms were a toxic cocktail of chemicals and particulate matter. The comms networks had all been shot since they landed. Antros cut the signal and waited to face the sepolcrali alone, waving Myos back into the temple.

Antros was about to step out and launch his attack when he noticed how oddly the xenos were behaving. As they spilled around the moonlit fist and

filled the quarry, they began to knot together like fibres, twisting and tightening.

As the ash worms grew in number the coiling mass gradually expanded, moving closer to the doors of the temple. Antros readied his pistol. 'You will not find a Blood Angel such easy prey,' he muttered.

They had now filled the clearing with such a dazzling glow that Antros found it hard to look, but he did not need to see them to know that the prophesised moment had come.

What did you see?

The vision rocked him again and his mind pounded with the sense that something momentous was about to occur. The sepolcrali were touching the doors. He could hear their pale forms, brushing against the stonework.

'Stay inside,' he growled to Myos. Then he stepped out to face them.

The creatures ignored Antros and hurtled towards each other, colliding in a tornado of ghostly shapes. They formed a vortex, spinning around a figure he could not quite make out. This was the malignant horror he had dreamed of. Finally, he would meet his daemonic accuser. Past and present collided as the events of the vision unfolded before Antros.

In the visions he had thought the ash worms were flanking the figure, but now he saw they were attacking him – diving and lunging, trying to pierce his flesh. As the vision played out, Antros found it hard to stand. He was drunk on prophecy, blinded by premonition.

As in the visions, the figure was little more than a blurred silhouette, but as it came closer, Antros finally saw the truth. He had seen this moment so many times.

'Mephiston,' he muttered, his pulse hammering.

Mephiston launched his attack.

There was a chorus of metallic shrieks as the Chief Librarian exploded into action. He spread his black wings and tore through the aliens, gripping his sword in both hands and swinging it in flashing arcs of psychic energy. The sepolcrali burst into sheets of white flame, scattering fragments of ivory meat across the clearing. Mephiston worked with the same cold-blooded precision Antros had seen earlier. As he rose up from the tumult, his face was devoid of emotion.

The sepolcrali turned away from Antros and he watched the scene in stunned silence. There was a dark beauty to Mephiston's lunges and

pirouettes but an endless tide of the shimmering serpents poured up around the fist. For every ten that Mephiston destroyed, another twenty arrived; for every twenty, another thirty. However lethal his technique, it was impossible for him to destroy them all. The sepolcrali showed no sign of fear or even caution. There was something remorseless about their advance. Mephiston may as well have been fighting an avalanche.

Antros shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. He crossed the steps and began firing at the edges of the pit, picking off the creatures that had yet to reach Mephiston. His shots barked out, shearing through the sepolcrali and filling the air with even more ash.

Mephiston fought on oblivious, his force sword burning through foe after foe. Time wore on and still they came at him, an endless series of thrusts and lunges as they attempted to break through his sword strikes. Mephiston was incredible to watch but Antros found himself wondering what would happen if one of the sepolcrali managed to pierce his armour. If they possessed Mephiston's body in the same way they possessed their other victims… The thought did not bear considering. He banished the idea with bolt fire, smiling in satisfaction as he saw the mound of corpses he was building. He may have misunderstood his visions, but he was still glad to be here, helping his lord against these revolting creatures.

Still they came and, gradually, the impossible happened – as ever greater numbers of the creatures tumbled down over Mephiston, he began to tire. His sword blows slowed and, incredibly, he started to miss some of his targets, staggering slightly, wrong-footed by mistimed blows.

The corpse-like rigidity of Mephiston's features was changing. As he failed to defeat the xenos, his face finally showed emotion, twisting into a bitter snarl. Antros could not tell whether the rage was directed at his foes or his inability to destroy them, but it did not really matter; what mattered was that Mephiston's composure had been broken. Antros had never heard of such a thing.

Finally, the Chief Librarian abandoned his sword and unleashed the naked power of his mind, howling arcane oaths and channelling great gouts of psychic power through his open hands. The columns of light tore through the clearing, incinerating everything they met.

Antros dived to one side as a bolt hurtled towards him. He rolled clear but the blast smashed into the masonry behind him, tearing a hole in the

wall of the temple.

He turned onto his back and saw a whirling mass of sepolcrali falling towards him. He loosed off another storm of bolt shells, splattering chunks of scorched white meat across the steps, then rose to his feet and looked around for Mephiston.

The crowd of sepolcrali had become a mountain, built around the white-hot core of Mephiston's rage. Antros could barely see him, but his power was evident everywhere. The clearing was networked with incandescent bolts. They were now detonating whole swathes of the xenos as well as levelling the surrounding forest. Many of the blasts were also hitting the temple and the whole structure was starting to teeter and slump.

'Myos,' muttered Antros, recalling the Guardsman. He pounded back up the steps, firing as he went, staggering against the shock waves rippling through the quarry as Mephiston's fury grew even more ferocious. Antros could hear him crying out in frustration. It was a shocking, inhuman sound.

The temple was drenched in warp light. Large sections of the roof had collapsed, covering the mosaic floor in piles of rubble. He half expected to find Myos dead, but he was hunched in the moonlight, gun raised, surrounded by debris.

Antros nodded to the doorway. 'You need to leave.' He led him out onto the steps. 'We will deal with the xenos.'

Myos looked out through the collapsing walls of the building and lowered his gun in shock.

Hundreds of the ash creatures were revolving around Mephiston. They were illuminated so fiercely by his wrath that it seemed as though a sun had formed in the clearing. It blazed brighter until Myos was forced to turn away and even Antros had to squint against the glare. Then Antros heard a voice cry out, feral and inhuman: 'Enough!'

The sun shattered.

Antros and the Guardsman were hit by incredible force and thrown backwards through the ruins. Antros managed to keep hold of Myos as they were lifted from their feet. He attempted to shield him from the hail of masonry that flew after them. Antros collided with the wall, smashed through to the other side and landed with a grunt, his bolt pistol flying from his grip.

Serpents wound lazily through the stars, crushing the heavens in their dislocated jaws. A griffon reared protectively over a flame, roaring the word 'Mephiston'. A world burned.

Antros lay there, frozen, as a new series of visions ripped through his head.

Suffocating beneath the rubble. Roaring in endless rage. Dead and undying. A woman approaching through the fumes, calling for help. Her face veiled. Her skin torn away. The veil stained with blood where it had brushed against her ruined face. What did you see?

The visions faded and Antros saw the pit once again. The blinding vortex had gone, replaced by the paler light of the moon. Myos was beside him, dazed and bloody but alive.

A dreadful sound still filled the clearing – a bestial roar that sliced through the night, making the eerie quiet that followed seem dreadfully ominous.

Antros rose and helped Myos to his feet. They both picked their way back through the rubble to the front of the building. Antros paused, shocked by the sight that greeted them, unsure what was vision and what was fact.

Myos staggered on, shaking his head.

The sepolcrali were dead. *All* of them were dead. The pit around the stone fist was carpeted in burned flesh. The smell of charred meat hung in the air and the mounds of gore had turned the surrounding forest into a charnel house. But it was not the piles of corpses that Antros and Myos were staring at; it was Mephiston. Or, at least, Antros thought it was Mephiston. The thing crouched at the edge of the pit wore the same scalloped, crimson armour as the Chief Librarian, but in every other way he had been transformed. Aetheric light was blazing through his armour as he tore through the corpses. His flesh was limned with oily, dark flames.

Antros hesitated, confused, but Myos staggered on, climbing down the steps. 'You destroyed them,' he said, reaching out towards Mephiston. 'So *many* of them.'

Mephiston looked up. His face was a blood-infused flame and his eyes flashed deep carmine. His teeth gleamed, cruel and white, as he launched himself at Myos.

Myos howled as Mephiston crashed into him.

Mephiston grabbed him by the throat and lifted him easily up over his

head, roaring incoherently. Power spat from his armour as he prepared to throw Myos against the ruins.

'Wait!' cried Antros.

The words hit Mephiston like a slap. He reeled back down the steps, hurling Myos to the ground.

Myos landed heavily and Antros followed Mephiston, unsure what to do.

'Are you wounded, Chief Librarian?'

Mephiston stared back, a cornered beast, hunched and dangerous, ready to pounce. 'Antros,' he said, his feral voice struggling to form the word. Then he said it again with more confidence. 'Antros.' Suddenly, he was changing. He rose from his crouch and drew back his shoulders. The snarl dropped from his face and the dark fire faded from his skin. He looked around at the carnage he had wrought. 'What…?' he began, but his words petered out and he looked at Antros in confusion. He retrieved Vitarus from the blood-soaked turf and stared at it. Every inch of the force sword was stained with blood.

'My lord–' Antros began, but he paused as Mephiston saw Lieutenant Myos, broken and silent, sprawled across the steps.

Mephiston looked from Myos to Antros, his eyes half-lidded.

'Chief Librarian,' Antros said, stepping to his side. 'You destroyed so many of them.' He looked around at rolling hills of corpses. 'Whatever happens now, the sepolcrali will always recall the day they faced the sons of Sanguinius.'

Mephiston wiped some blood from his face, revealing the waxen skin beneath. His eyes were still clouded as he turned to face Antros. A ghost of savagery contorted his voice. 'What did you see?'

Antros almost cried out as he heard the words that had been so long coming. This was the question that had been echoing round his head for months.

As Mephiston glared at him, animal hunger still smouldering in his eyes, Antros realised that he could see a shadow of the Chief Librarian's mind. The bond he had felt during the battle was growing – becoming a permanent link between them. They were joining somehow. And as he peered into his lord's mind, Antros saw quite clearly that Mephiston meant to kill him.

'What did you *see?*' repeated Mephiston, stepping closer.

‘I saw you destroy our enemy. I saw you strike them down with–’

‘No,’ Mephiston interrupted, his voice quiet and dangerous as he locked his hand around Antros’ arm, still gripping Vitarus in the other. ‘You saw more than that. What did you see in *my mind*, Lexicanium Antros?’

Antros faltered. ‘I have seen strange visions,’ he admitted. He tried to look Mephiston directly in the eye. ‘I did not understand them.’

Mephiston tightened his grip and Antros whispered a prayer.

Over on the steps, Myos groaned. The sound broke something in Mephiston’s eyes. He loosed his grip on Antros and backed away. When he looked up again, all trace of the monster had vanished; he was the Lord of the Librarius once more, phlegmatic and detached.

Antros’ fears suddenly felt ridiculous. How could he have imagined Mephiston would harm one of his own servants?

‘See to him,’ said Mephiston, nodding at Myos. ‘I must find Captain Vatrenus and clear the valley of revenants, or this evacuation will become even more of a mess.’ He took a deep breath, wiped more blood from his face and marched towards the edge of the clearing. Before he left, he paused and looked back.

‘I have work to do in the Cronian Sector but I will summon you when I return to Baal. Do not speak of this to anyone.’

‘My lord,’ said Antros, ‘I would not know what to say.’

Mephiston did not seem to hear him. ‘None of this is how it appears.’ His voice was a thick jumble of accents and Antros could barely make out the words. ‘And it would not do to cast doubt on me, to cast doubt on ideas that carry such currency, ideas that have given our bloodline so much hope.’

‘Of course, my lord,’ Antros began, but Mephiston had already vanished into the trees.

Antros turned back to Myos, eager to bind his wounds and hurry him back to the camp. He met a fixed, blank stare.

Myos was dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Divinus Prime, The Cronian Sector,
Six weeks later

‘You have been reborn.’

Prester Kohath reeled in the dark, shocked to realise he was not alone. He stumbled over a hill of bones and peered into the smoke, twitching and muttering as he searched for the voice’s owner. ‘Who’s that? Who’s there?’

Flames had painted everything red, ruins and corpses alike, and he felt as though he were slipping through the guts of a great beast. All around him the world was tearing itself apart, collapsing in a promethium storm of blood and fire. Valkyrie gunships screamed past like daemons, carving up the night with incendiaries and bolter fire, while the valley below sank under the weight of its numberless dead.

Prester Kohath reached around in the piles of bodies, trembling as he prised a pistol from the fingers of a dead trooper. Such a soft voice should not have been audible over the pounding thud of the artillery. *Warpcraft*. He could taste it, oily and metallic on the night air. ‘What have I done?’ he whispered. ‘Why did I leave? Why tonight?’ He waved the gun at the distant battle lines and raised his voice, attempting to sound fierce. ‘I’m not alone. One call to those Guardsmen and–’

Something drifted through the darkness towards him.

‘Wait!’ He crouched and aimed. ‘Show yourself!’

There was no reply and Prester Kohath did not ask again. Whatever madness was consuming Divinus Prime, it would not consume him. To die now, after finally seeing the truth, would be too cruel a trick. He *had* to survive. Despite his trembling hands, he managed to unleash a blast of las-fire. It lit up the surrounding corpses and they seemed to dance, twitching in time with his clumsy shots.

The shadow fell away and Prester Kohath lowered his pistol, blinking in the afterglow, trying to see what he had killed.

'We are all reborn. With every new breath.' The voice was closer now, coming from behind him. 'The man who fired that gun is already gone, already a ghost.'

Prester Kohath cursed and backed away, jabbing his pistol at the shadows.

'Every new thought remakes us. Every decision is a rebirth.' There was a distant, distracted tone to the voice, as though the speaker were merely thinking aloud. 'There is *always* another chance.'

Prester Kohath fired again, wildly this time, creating another tableau of blue-limned corpses. 'Show yourself!' he yelled.

'Would you kill me,' asked the disembodied voice, 'without even asking my name?' There was no anger, only mild surprise.

Prester Kohath spat another curse. The voice was directly above him now. He looked up and saw a deepening of the darkness, a shadow within shadows. It blocked the burning heavens as it fell towards him. Clumsy with panic, he backed away, tripping across the rubble as he fired again. Blue flame kicked from the muzzle, revealing a sight so disturbing that Prester Kohath howled.

The bloody ruins had spawned an avatar, a giant carved from the same crimson flesh – an ivory-faced daemon borne on death-black pinions.

Prester Kohath's shots were useless. Each blast rippled harmlessly across the flayed muscle and lit up the thing's grotesque face – a mask of cracked alabaster with eyes that made Prester Kohath cry out in shock. All the lunacy of Divinus Prime was in that ashen face, burning in an infernal gaze.

Prester Kohath collapsed. He tumbled against a shattered column, struck his head and slumped, insensate, into a ditch.

When he came to, the monster had its back to him. Dawn was approaching, and there was enough light for Prester Kohath to see his

mistake – the flayed muscle was actually a suit of thick battleplate, intricately wrought and designed to resemble skinless flesh. The wings must have been a delusion brought on by his fear, but the stranger *was* a giant, seven or eight feet tall. At first, he thought he might be looking at a mortal warrior. Then the light shifted across the ruins and passed through the giant's flesh. Kohath realised he was sitting with a ghost.

To Kohath's relief, the grim apparition did not turn to face him. It was crouched near a corpse, one of the dragoons from the capital. The poor soul's helmet had been torn open by shrapnel and the head was a misshapen mess. Something was crawling through the grey matter: an eager host of milk-white grubs.

The ghost was staring intently at this gruesome display and, despite his fear, Kohath felt a macabre desire to see what the spirit was doing. As he watched, the ghost removed one of its gauntlets and drew a series of arcane symbols on the dusty ground. Then it lifted a long, ceremonial knife from its robes, sliced the palm of its hand open and made a fist. A quick torrent of blood rushed from between its fingers and pattered onto the symbols it had drawn. As it landed, the blood traced the shapes of the characters as if it were sentient, feeling its way through them. When the symbols had all been drawn, they flickered, as though particles of metallic dust were suspended in the liquid. The spirit whispered some unintelligible words and then pressed its bloody hand onto the crimson text. The letters bubbled and hissed at the contact, and when the ghost removed its hand the symbols were scorched into the ground.

Kohath dragged his thoughts from the strange ritual, realising that, while the ghost was so fixated on its work, he had a chance to flee. Kohath lifted himself slowly into a crouching position and prepared to run.

'What do you see?' asked the spectre, nodding at the broken corpse of the soldier. The spirit's voice was cold, inhuman.

Prester Kohath wanted to run, but as he looked at the corpse it reminded him of all the horrors he had seen over the last few months, all the bloodshed caused by a war that made no sense. Rage boiled through him, drawing out an unexpected reply.

'Pointless sacrifice.'

Still the ghost did not turn. 'Pointless? A strange choice of word, Prester Kohath. What could be more worthwhile than the fight for survival?' He

picked up one of the wriggling grubs. ‘Even these lowly creatures understand that. And you and I understand far higher truths. Unto death we serve, Prester Kohath, *unto death*. As it has always been.’ The spirit paused, wiping the blood from its hand. ‘Or perhaps you’ve learned a new philosophy.’

Prester Kohath’s face flushed. ‘Survival? Is that what you see down there?’ He waved at the massacre taking place beyond the ruins.

The ghost turned to look, revealing a gaunt, bone-white profile. Guardsmen of countless regiments were dying in the dark, blasting and hacking each other down in the flames. More pitiful still were the priests, Prester Kohath’s own brethren, the Children of the Vow. They were kneeling in prayer, holding up patens and censers as volleys of las-fire tore them apart.

The spirit’s face remained expressionless, driving Prester Kohath to an even greater rage. ‘How do you know my name, ghost?’ he snapped, looking around for his pistol.

‘Ghost?’

To Prester Kohath’s horror, the phantom turned to face him and he caught a brief, unbearable glimpse of its eyes.

‘What do you see?’ repeated the spirit, still holding the grub.

‘Death,’ muttered Prester Kohath.

The ground shifted and hurled Prester Kohath forwards. He landed, gasping, just a few feet from the ghost.

‘Look harder.’

Prester Kohath looked back to his dying brethren instead, reaching out to them with a trembling hand.

His head jolted back, against his will, forcing him to look at the grub. It was now sated and red, coiling and uncoiling between the ghost’s fingers.

Kohath saw a flash of iridescence and looked closer. Slowly, the grub parted its flesh to reveal tiny, diaphanous wings.

‘Death?’ asked the ghost. ‘Or transformation?’

There was doubt in the spirit’s voice. This was a genuine question. Prester Kohath turned to look it in the eye. What he saw in those eyes finally broke his nerve. His screams rang out, even over the din of the battle, and when the echoes ceased he was on another world.

CHAPTER THREE

Librarium Sagrestia, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Bells rang out in the Orbicular Tower, summoning a tide of crookbacked wraiths. They boiled from the shadows – pale, emaciated serfs; skittering, spider-legged savants and hooded, tube-limbed scribes, all chanting and typing as they ran, pounding at ceramic keys with metal-hinged fingers and singing hymns through oily, riveted throats. As they flooded the tower's cloistered walkways they filled them with a storm of parchment and plainsong, dizzy with ecstasy and fear.

As the multitude grew larger it grew more frantic and confused. Robed figures in a variety of shapes were soon milling around the statue-lined halls of the Librarium. Human bondsmen argued furiously over the exact meaning of the alarm, while blank-eyed servo-scribes spewed reams of data at them, grinding out perforated sheets with clanking, crank-handled forelimbs.

Just as the frenzied scene seemed on the verge of outright violence, a giant in night-blue armour walked into the centre of the tumult, towering over the mob in his gleaming battleplate. Lucius Antros carried an ornate staff, as tall as he was, and he announced his presence by cracking it several times on the flagstones.

The serfs ceased their arguing and stepped back to create a path, panting and wide-eyed as they let the Librarian by. Even the servitors ceased their

mechanised din, wheeling and clattering away as Antros stepped up into an iron pulpit and looked down at the sea of upturned faces. Even amongst this strange assembly, he was a striking individual. He wore no helmet and his face bore all the hallmarks of a Blood Angel: chiselled, noble and inhumanly beautiful, framed by a shoulder-length mane of blond hair. His looks alone would have made him an impressive sight, and yet, it was not the most arresting thing about him. Antros' perfect features were marked by a fierce craving; hunger burned in his flawless blue eyes.

Antros was irritated by what he saw: a mania, coiling through the minds of even his most experienced blood thralls. And an absurd undercurrent of panic. He allowed his consciousness to snake through the crowd, plucking at the thoughts of his servants, peering into their blinkered little souls. Their daily routine of study had been interrupted and that was enough to drive them into a frenzy. Since his return from Thermia V he had felt buried alive in these halls, crushed under a mountain of timid bureaucrats and myopic scriveners. He had barely slept since the death of Lieutenant Myos, troubled by images of the slaughter at the pit and waiting with mixed emotions for a summons from Mephiston.

He had no doubt who would be responsible for stirring up this current nonsense. The chief pedant herself. 'Scholiast Ghor?' he asked, his voice strong and resonant. 'Are you there?'

There was a scuffle at the far end of the hall as a woman strolled through the crowds. She was dressed in scarlet robes, embroidered with golden runes and, in her own way, Dimitra Ghor was just as striking as Lexicanium Antros. She was so tall and wasted that her robes seemed to hang from her skull-like, shaven head. Only the knife-blade tips of her shoulders gave any hint of the brittle, keen-edged body beneath. Her features were angular and androgynous and her skin was papery and translucent, revealing the pulsing veins beneath. She embodied everything Antros found oppressive about his subordinates. Dimitra was as dusty and dry as an old page. She climbed the pulpit with careful, unhurried steps, like a mantis edging towards its prey.

'Are you responsible for this?' he asked, nodding at the speakers blaring overhead. The distorted, amplified sound of the bells was still ringing out through the Librarium.

Though unusually tall for a mortal, Dimitra looked like a child beside the

Librarian, dwarfed by his transhuman bulk. ‘Yes, Lexicanium,’ she replied, keeping her gaze respectfully locked on the floor. She spoke through tight lips, her face rigid. Her large, wide-spaced eyes added to the strangeness of her appearance; the irises so dark that she seemed to only have pupils.

Antros could feel the servants of the Orbicular Tower concentrating on the exchange, even if their eyes were fixed on their feet, and he sensed that their loyalties were still with Ghor, rather than their new lord. He had little interest in the convoluted hierarchies and protocols of blood thralls, but such disrespect could not be tolerated.

‘Then I overestimated you,’ he said. ‘Even the most junior Rubricator can memorise the Rites of Convocation. What is this nonsense you’re broadcasting?’

Dimitra glanced up at him, her eyes like discs of flint. ‘The auguries were quite clear.’

‘The auguries were quite clear, *Lexicanium*,’ he growled.

‘Forgive me, my lord,’ she said, her voice taut. ‘The signs were quite clear, Lexicanium. There is a psychic rift in the Ostensorio. The warning comes from the highest authority: from Lord Rhacelus himself. We are to seal the gates and ensure that no one leaves or enters the tower.’

Antros shook his head in disbelief at the mention of the Chief Librarian’s equerry. ‘Rhacelus? What are you talking about? A psychic rift inside the Arx Angelicum? Inside the *Librarium?* Show me what you have.’

Dimitra slowly drew out a bundle of thin vellum strips, stuck together by carefully applied wax seals. Her hairless scalp was haloed by a forest of brass-rimmed lenses – dozens of them, all different sizes and shapes and fixed to a metal crest. They moved as she examined the documents with infuriating care, focusing on each page in turn and flicking through them with her long, tapered fingers. She held one of them up and used another of her lenses, a mechanised lorgnette, to examine it. The frame of the eyeglass whirred and clicked as it dropped in front of her face and focused on the vellum. Then she nodded and handed it to Antros. ‘It appears that there is a blood rite in progress that has not gone according to Lord Rhacelus’ prognostications.’

He shook his head. ‘Only the most senior Librarians are permitted to enter the Ostensorio. Nothing could have gone wrong with Lord Rhacelus

present.’

He looked closer at the text and his augmented irises swam with glyphs and runes. He was sure that she was misreading the signs. Only the most powerful brothers of the Librarius would perform invocations in the Ostensorio. The suggestion that they might lose control was absurd. Then another thought occurred to him: however ridiculous this summons might be, it gave him an excuse to break from his tiresome duties in the Orbicular Tower. And perhaps even to hear news of Mephiston. He shoved the papers into a pouch strapped to his leg armour and turned to face the crowd.

‘I will make a brief visit to the Ostensorio. Return to your scriptoria and continue your work.’ None of the serfs dared to look up but he felt the relief in their minds. The scribes hated any interruption to their work and they rarely left the Orbicular Tower.

There was an explosion of rustling noises as the serfs and servitors began clearing the hall.

Antros strode off across the flagstones, passing quickly through the scriptoria, calefactories and libraries of the Orbicular Tower, then out through the eastern gate into the wider Librarium. He crossed the soaring bridge known as the Spear of Sanguinius and marched on through the countless writing rooms, sacrariums and reliquaries of the Sagrestia, accompanied all the while by the harsh clanging of the amplified bells. Then he entered the oldest quarters of the Librarium – dark, narrow walkways, lined with crumbling, winged statues that formed tunnels with their overlapping swords. Blood thralls from other quarters of the Librarium were rushing in the same direction, and Antros saw the same ridiculously frantic expressions on their faces. He had never felt such a mood in the Librarium before.

Antros’ own mood grew darker as he saw a priest of the Adeptus Ministorum loitering in the shadows beneath one of the statues. He grunted in disapproval. Over the last few months Baal had been invaded by wide-eyed pilgrims from the Cronian Sector. Even by the standards of the Ministorum, they struck Antros as an odd bunch. Their white-and-gold robes were not so unusual, but they also had white lead painted on their faces and rouge smeared around their eyes, which made them look either sinister or absurd, depending on the light. These white-faced fanatics

carried banners emblazoned with a winged, angelic figure and Antros had heard it rumoured that both the banners, and the face paint, were meant as some kind of tribute to Mephiston. If this were true, it was an affront to the dignity of the Chief Librarian, but the Chapter Council had taken the surprising step of allowing a small group of pilgrims access to the Librarium. He had never heard of such a thing happening before but it was said that Mephiston himself had given the order. The zealot beneath the statue showed little understanding of the great honour that Mephiston had bestowed on him – he was wailing and praying in the most undignified manner, pleading for a glimpse of the Chief Librarian. Mephiston was not, of course, to be found idling in the Librarium and Antros doubted the pilgrim would recognise his idol even if he walked past him.

Finally Antros arrived at the north gate of the Ostensorio. He came to a halt and smiled at the sight of the vast doors. They were a marvel – crimson slabs of Baalite rock, hundreds of feet tall and covered with glittering, blood drop stones from the Cruor Mountains. The red stone had been carved with images portraying the early life of Sanguinius and his first meeting with the God-Emperor.

His smile faded as he saw battle-brothers of the Fourth Company gathered at the foot of the steps before the huge gates – two squads of Tactical Marines in full battleplate. These giants towered over the blood thralls who were dashing between the buildings, and however nonchalantly they cradled their beautifully inscribed bolters, there was no disguising the threat of death that poured from behind their featureless visors.

Antros strode up to the captain in charge, the only warrior in the line with his face visible, his helmet mag-clamped to his thigh.

The officer's stern features were almost indistinguishable from those of the heroes chiselled into the crimson gates behind him. He was as inhumanly perfect as Antros and also carried himself with the confidence of a veteran – a confidence Antros could imitate but not yet feel. The captain's only trace of mortality was a thick, ridged scar that began at the right-hand corner of his mouth and crossed diagonally up to his left cheek.

Antros climbed the steps and saluted. 'Captain Vatrenus,' he said.

The captain nodded in recognition and returned the salute. 'Lexicanium Antros,' rumbled the other Space Marine. Even without the amplification of his helmet, the captain's voice resonated like a tolling bell. They had

met during the cleansing of Thermia V, but Vatrenus made no mention of the campaign.

'I received strange news in the Orbicular Tower,' said Antros. He was unsure if he would be able to talk his way inside, but had decided to try. 'The auguries implied that Epistolary Rhacelus needs my help.'

The captain raised an eyebrow.

'If my masters are assembled here,' said Antros, 'Lord Rhacelus should know that I am–'

The captain raised a hand to silence him, as though he were the lowliest of menials, and Antros had to bite back an angry retort.

Captain Vatrenus looked into the middle distance and Antros heard the crackle of a vox-message, relayed through a bead in his ear. The captain was clearly surprised by whatever data he was receiving. 'Yes,' he said. 'The Lexicanium from the Orbicular Tower, Lucius Antros. He has learned of the situation.' There was another crackle of vox-chatter and Vatrenus nodded again. 'Standing right in front of me.' He nodded. 'Very well.' After a moment's hesitation, he stepped aside and waved Antros on with his bolter, then he grabbed him by the arm. 'Take care, brother,' he said, looking warily at the Ostensorio. 'If I were you I'd wait in the Auran Chapel and keep your head down.' He grimaced with distaste. 'From what I hear, Lord Rhacelus is involved in something *unusual*.'

Antros was not surprised by the captain's tone. There were few in the Chapter who weren't unnerved by the mysteries of the Librarius. Antros nodded and stepped forwards.

Up ahead of him, another battle-brother of the Fourth Company opened a door at the foot of the gates. This opening was a less imposing aperture, only twenty feet or so tall. It was decorated just as lavishly as the main gates, but Antros did not pause to study it, hurrying on into the Ostensorio as the door slammed behind him.

Several members of the Librarius were gathered inside the darkened chamber – Codiciers and Epistolaries all dressed for battle in massive suits of polished blue ceramite. Antros had never seen so many of his brothers in one place. The air was charged with blood magic and he sensed immediately that a grand ritual was in progress. Dead-eyed cherubs lit the scene, drifting beneath the barrel vaults on flashing, golden wings. Thuribles trailed from their fingers, glinting in the candlelight and trailing

a fine, crimson mist. Scrolls of parchment fluttered beneath their fat little legs and the air was thick with incense-heavy smoke that almost, but not quite masked the iron-rich, abattoir stink of the chamber. Antros reached the chapel and climbed its steps for a better view of the proceedings.

On the far side of the chamber was a huge, shimmering hololith – a projection of a Ministorum priest, sitting on an ornate, ceremonial throne. His face was painted white, like all the other pilgrims that had come to Baal, and he looked like an enormous ghost, towering over the scene as the projection flickered in and out of view, broken up by crackling bursts of interference. Even through the red mist that filled the chamber, Antros could see that he was a senior prelate of the Adeptus Ministorum. His chasuble was embroidered with beautiful images of the Golden Throne and his plump frame was draped in religious baubles. The hololith was forty or so feet tall and the priest's face was quivering with anticipation as he fidgeted and shifted in his chair, staring intently at the Librarians.

Gathered around the feet of this spectral throne was a group of cowled pilgrims, their faces hidden in their deep hoods and their hands clasped in prayer. Antros could feel the religious fervour burning in their chests. They believed they were about to witness a miracle they had long prayed for.

The Librarians were assembled in the centre of the hall with their backs to the projection, standing at the top of a broad, circular dais. They were arranged around a golden monstrance – a tall, metal stand, set on a wide marble base at the centre of the dais and supporting a semicircular cradle of brass. With their heads bowed and their swords raised, it looked as though the Librarians were worshipping a huge, metal chalice. Antros had never before been admitted to the Ostensorio. It was a site of great mystery to him – reserved for only the most senior members of his order. On any other occasion, he would have paused to marvel at the beauty of the monstrance. It was a masterpiece of devotional craft, dozens of feet wide and filigreed with elegiac scenes of angelic warhosts; but he was not looking at the ancient relic. Hovering above it, spitting and steaming, was a sphere of boiling blood.

Antros was so surprised by the huge crimson ball that he let the tip of his staff clatter against the steps. The sound of metal hitting stone rang out through the gloom.

Some of the priests glanced in his direction, but the Librarians paid him no heed. Their eyes were firmly closed and their raised weapons were linked to the sphere by cords of red fire, flicking back and forth and painting ghostly images in the dark. The strands of blood magic coruscated and coiled, feeding the inferno above the monstrance. Since entering the Ostensorio, Antros had felt psychic energy tugging at his consciousness, pulsing through his veins and echoing round his skull like a sinister hymn. He realised that the aetheric power was emanating from the red sphere. As it blazed brighter it filled his mind with an inhuman, looping howl. The pitiless song of the warp.

'Lexicanium,' cried one of the Librarians, turning briefly away from the monstrance to look at him. His face was glistening with sweat and the lights made it look like he was drenched in blood. His features were contorted with pain and concentration and it took Antros a moment to recall that his name was Peloris. 'Stand by me!' gasped Peloris, trembling. 'Be ready! We're losing him!'

Antros rushed to his brother's side, his pulse racing at the thought of joining in such a powerful invocation. As he neared the dais he saw that there was a shape forming in the centre of the sphere. He peered closer, fascinated. Something was *alive* in the blood. Something wreathed in fire. 'Losing who?' he whispered, but Peloris did not reply.

The Librarians around him were straining in agonised silence as the sphere grew larger, their eyes clamped shut as they channelled furious gouts of psychic flame through their swords. They resembled riggers working at a storm-lashed sail, shaking and scowling as elemental power tore through them. Antros could feel the carrion chill of blood-craft washing over his face and the behaviour of the guards outside began to make sense. This ritual was not going to plan. That much was clear from the circle of grim faces flickering in and out of view as the cherubs whirled overhead. The ghostly colossus on the far side of the chamber leant forwards in his chair, his eyes straining wider.

'Concentrate,' said Peloris, glancing at him. 'Be ready.'

Needles of red energy began spraying from Peloris' power armour, flickering across the clouds of scented smoke. Antros felt the force of it shivering along the length of his staff.

The noise grew louder and the flagstones answered in kind, groaning and

creaking beneath the hunched Librarian. Then the whole room started to judder, as if in the grip of a quake.

There was a harsh cracking sound, as though the air itself had snapped, and Peloris was lifted off his feet and hurled away from the monstrance like a child's toy. His massive, armour-clad form clattered across the flagstones, trailing smoke as he crashed into the base of a pillar. He cried out in rage and frustration as the cord of magic he had been channelling lurched free, a wild serpent, lashing back and forth.

'Peloris!' bellowed another one of the Librarians on the far side of the circle.

Even in the shifting light, Antros recognised him. Epistolary Rhacelus was Mephiston's equerry and one of the longest-serving veterans in the entire Chapter. Rhacelus had been responsible for much of Antros' training and his contemptuous glare still haunted his dreams. The psychic hood of Rhacelus' power armour was ablaze with warpfire and, as he climbed to his feet, his whole body shook under the strain. Sparks were crackling around his eyes and gums, spitting and flashing as they danced over his face, but he drew back his shoulders and kept his force sword aloft, holding up the column of energy he was channelling. 'Lexicanium Antros,' he said calmly, as though he were merely ordering a servant to fetch him a drink. 'Close ranks.' Despite his exertions, he managed to give Antros a warning glance. 'Do not let me down, neophyte.'

Despite his raging heart, Antros stepped calmly into the circle, catching the loose arc of crimson on the head of his staff. The impact rocked him back on his heels, but he held his place, clutching the staff in both hands as it quivered and sparked. Pain washed over his flesh, as though he had been set alight, but the agony was dwarfed by the torrent of visions that exploded in his head. Another world superimposed itself over the Ostensorio. Vast sheets of flame thundered past beneath him as powerful wings hurled him through the air. The vision was wonderful and overwhelming. It took every ounce of his training to anchor his thoughts. 'What is this?' he cried, his voice contorted by pain. He sensed a being of incredible power forming above the huge chalice. 'What are we summoning?'

Rhacelus was unwilling, or unable, to reply. He merely twisted his lip into an even more disdainful curl.

Antros tried to decipher the shape in the blood. It was still too vague to make out so he switched his gaze to his Brother-Librarians. As the light of the sphere swelled and enveloped them, the Librarians' noble features began to change, growing feral and furious. They howled in outrage and Antros joined his voice to theirs as he felt the cause of their anger. Whatever Rhacelus had intended to invoke, they were now facing something horrific. The warp itself was straining to breach the sanctity of their fortress-monastery. Incredibly, something was trying to enter the Librarium. Antros found it hard to breathe, suffocated by a potent mixture of outrage and excitement. The visions threatened to overwhelm him again, but then he sensed a presence beside him and turned to see Lexicanium Peloris. Peloris was barely able to stand. His power armour had been rent open by the psychic blast he had taken and his mouth was full of blood. He managed to nod at Antros. 'I'm ready,' he said. 'If you fall.'

'What are we–?' began Antros.

'Now!' said Epistolary Rhacelus, interrupting Antros as he sliced his sword down through the air. It connected with a brass circular channel, embedded in the flagstones, creating a blinding shower of sparks. The other Librarians followed suit, smashing their swords against the metal, severing the cords of power and enveloping the dais with crimson light. For a second the red sphere burned white, blinding everyone, then the light vanished, leaving nothing. All the lights had vanished – not just the sphere but the cords of magic too.

Unbalanced, Antros staggered forwards, straining to discern shapes in the void.

For a while there was nothing, just the laboured breathing of the unseen Librarians and the thick, charnel stink. Then, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Antros saw a crouched, powerful shadow, just visible at the centre of the circle.

+I was sure the answer would be there,+ said a hushed voice, speaking directly into Antros' mind. +But I found nothing.+

Light seeped back into the chamber as braziers sputtered back into life and the cherubs' candles reignited, revealing the figure at the centre of the circle. Finally, Antros saw the being they had wrenched from the warp: Mephiston, Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels, Master of the Librarius.

The Lord of Death had returned.

CHAPTER FOUR

Librarium Sagrestia, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Unlike the other Adeptus Astartes gathered in the Ostensorio, Mephiston's armour was crimson. The ceramite plates were intricately sculpted to resemble flayed muscle and as Mephiston rose from the floor of the chamber his robes billowed around him like blood pooling in water. Behind him, a faint echo of the sphere could still be seen, a void rolling in the darkness, a window on the stars.

As the lights returned, they revealed the sprawled forms of the other Librarians scattered across the stone floor. At the sight of their lord they clambered to their feet and grabbed their discarded swords. They formed into orderly ranks and pounded the hilts against their chests. 'Chief Librarian,' they cried in proud, strident tones. Taking his place amongst them, Antros mirrored their salute and stood erect, awed by the sight of his lord.

At the same moment, the projection of the priest rose from its throne and began shouting words that were lost to the void. His mouth opened and closed but no sound reached the chamber. The hooded priests crowded around the projector, tapping dials and flicking switches until a deafening voice boomed through the air, backed by a shrill wail of feedback.

'*My lord! What did you find?*' roared the ghost-priest, his jowly face trembling with emotion. '*Is Divinus Prime safe? Did you–?*'

He paused as he noticed what Mephiston was carrying. Hanging limply in the Chief Librarian's grip was an unconscious man, a robed priest.

+Yet, perhaps there was the echo of an answer,+ said Mephiston, speaking as calmly as if he had just entered the hall through a doorway. +Something just beyond my reach.+ No one else heard him and Antros realised the words only existed in his head.

'An answer to what?' he whispered.

The flickering image cried out again, frustrated by the lack of a reply. '*Chief Librarian?*' The static-chopped voice broke down into a series of abrupt barks and feedback loops. '*Can. You. Hear. Meee? What has bebebebecome. Divinus Prime?'* He stared at the unconscious man. *'Who is that? One of ours?*'

Mephiston continued to ignore him as he laid the priest carefully on the floor and turned back to the fading sphere. A look of mild surprise crossed his face. +I have been followed,+ he said, speaking directly into Antros' mind again. He sounded intrigued rather than alarmed.

Antros braced himself seconds before the chamber exploded. A thunder crack hurled Mephiston through the air. He smashed through the ranks of Librarians and tumbled into the darkness, leaving a trail of sparks as his armour scraped across the stone.

Behind him, the afterimage of the blood sphere surged back into existence and warped into a new form. Crimson light became crimson flesh as a gaping wound opened in the air, hanging just above the floor. It swelled like a disease-bloated tumour. The air around it rippled and congealed like pus. It looked like a septic scar, opening onto nothing.

The priest recoiled in horror, despite being half a galaxy away, but Antros and the other Librarians steadied themselves and levelled their force weapons at the growing tear.

'Chief Librarian?' cried Epistolary Rhacelus, searching the chamber for his commander. There was no reply from Mephiston, so Rhacelus gave his Brother-Librarians a silent order. They leapt to obey, fanning out to surround the horror forming in front of them. Shapes were bubbling from the aether. Something was emerging from the wound.

'On my command,' Rhacelus said, and Antros whispered an oath, causing his staff to sizzle and blaze with psychic power.

Flies began to drift from the hole. Just a few at first, winding lazily into

the chamber, then clouds of them, gushing through the opening, adding a low drone to the din that had already filled the air. Antros recognised the magnitude of what was happening. Danger in the very heart of the Arx Angelicum was unheard of. He stared at the grotesque thing that was quickly filling the Ostensorio. It was a window onto madness and, as he raised his staff, a hellish tide of creatures spewed into the room, tumbling through the clouds of flies. It looked like a torrent of internal organs – a coiled mass of glistening tubes and pulsing sacs that slapped onto the floor of the chamber.

'By the Throne,' he grunted as a horrific smell filled the air. It was a thick stink of putrefaction and faeces, and he felt as though he were suddenly trapped inside the bowels of a rotting animal.

'On my command!' repeated Epistolary Rhacelus, gripping his sword in both hands and bracing himself as clouds of flies swarmed around him. His majestic tones revealed no trace of fear, but Antros could sense his outrage.

The visceral, faecal soup blossomed into humanoid forms, sprouting gangly, mottled limbs and hunched, pot-bellied torsos. Grubs blistered up from open sores, forming into drooling, slack-jawed faces. Others sprouted grey, membranous wings, bristling, insectoid faces and glistening proboscises.

Rhacelus waited a few seconds more, his face full of scorn as pus-yellow eyes blinked open in the centre of oozing, bulbous foreheads. Then he raised his chin, imposing and magnificent as he gave the signal to attack, bringing his sword down in a chopping motion.

Antros unleashed all his rage and determination through the head of his staff. A column of blue light ripped from the weapon and slammed into the emerging horde, joining the ferocious storm of psychic energy hurled by his brothers.

A grinding sound filled the chamber as the Librarians poured torrent after torrent into the creatures. A sphere of light began to form as their warpfire clashed with the malformed creatures, and an acrid stench of burning meat filled the air.

As Antros saw the full horror of the fly-shrouded shapes he knew instinctively what he was looking at. 'Daemons,' he muttered. During his gruelling years of training he had seen pict images of countless xeno-

types, including some far stranger looking than this, but it was not the anatomy that arrested him; it was the utter wrongness. They did not conform to any natural laws. Their crumbling, foetid flesh was revolting, but Antros' mind could see through it; it was just a façade – a shadow of their true, incomprehensible nature.

Antros broke ranks and climbed the steps of the chapel again, seeking a better view. As he looked back at the fighting he saw what the other Librarians could not – their psychic blasts were feeding the wound, causing it to gape ever wider. The front ranks of daemons were disintegrating under the ferocity of the Librarians' attack but as the hole widened it vomited ever-greater volumes of warp-filth into the chamber. Some of the Librarians strode forwards to meet them, lashing out with their swords and carving the daemons into slabs of scorched flesh.

'Stop!' he cried, knowing that his words would be lost beneath the din. On top of the noise of the Librarians' blasts, the swarming of the flies and the tearing of the air, the hololithic confessor was still crying out, his voice growing louder and more distorted with every word. '*MephMephMeph. Whaaaat. Youyouyouyou. MMMMeph.'* Everything merged into one dreadful, apocalyptic roar.

'Lord Rhacelus!' boomed Antros, striding back towards the fight, scouring the carnage for a site of the equerry.

The whole chamber was juddering and Antros found himself mired in a storm of flies and crimson sparks.

He closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to slip through the tempest, reaching out for Epistolary Rhacelus. Antros' powers were far greater than they had ever been before, magnified by the blood magic that was coruscating through the air. What he had intended as a simple call reached Rhacelus as a warp-fuelled scream.

He saw the veteran stagger under the impact of the message, scowling and clutching his head.

'Hold!' ordered Epistolary Rhacelus once he had recovered.

His Brother-Librarians obeyed, lowering their weapons. The smoke cleared to reveal a steaming mound of twitching daemons piled up before them, smouldering and flickering with ripples of warpfire.

Antros muttered a curse as he saw how big the gap in the air had grown – it had tripled in size and was spraying ever more nightmarish shapes at

them. Worse than that, it was straining outwards, bulging towards the edges. Something was forcing itself against the other side, something massive. As it swelled, it spewed even greater swarms of flies. They battered against the Librarians with such force that they struggled to stand and the entire chamber was now a storm of whirling fly clouds, making it impossible to see clearly.

Epistolary Rhacelus was about to give an order when Mephiston swept through the tornado, his spectral wings outstretched and his force sword raised as he dived into the heaving mass.

As Mephiston reached the tear, it opened with a wet, ripping sound and a black shape approached through the swarm of flies. There were now millions of the insects, and Antros could not see the shape clearly. In his mind he saw something that resembled a great geyser of oil that slammed into the Chief Librarian and engulfed him.

Mephiston's blade flashed and tore the storm apart, blasting the insects into sparkling blue embers. He continued on into the hole, vanishing from the materium into whatever hell lay beyond.

Mephiston was only gone for a few seconds. The clouds of flies parted as a new nightmare hauled him back into reality – a mountain of mucus-lined flesh that uncoiled itself slowly into the chamber, belching fumes and pulsating like a huge mollusc. It was so large it crashed against the ribs of the distant, vaulted ceiling, and it was encased in a mantle of frilled, rippling muscles that resembled rows of gills. Parts of this undulating mantle extended out from the main mass, creating long, serpentine limbs, one of which had almost entirely enveloped Mephiston. It was lifting him towards a serrated opening in the thing's eyeless head.

'No!' hissed Antros as he saw Mephiston nearing the mouth.

+Vermin,+ said a nonchalant voice in his head. +Nothing more.+

Mephiston plunged his force sword into the creature's mouth. Traceries of red light rippled through its enormous bulk and it reared up in pain, smashing through the ceiling of the Ostensorio. The stone gave way, sending arches and vaults tumbling down into the chamber, smashing into pieces and adding plumes of plaster dust to the clouds of flies.

The Ministorum priests started screaming as the structure of the Ostensorio gave way. Huge cracks knifed out from the hole created by the swaying bulk of the daemon as it lurched and undulated, colliding with

pillars and buttresses. Antros and the other Librarians were still hurling thick columns of energy at the daemons, filling the clouds with pulses of light and barked commands.

A Ministorum priest stumbled through the haze. Antros headed in the man's direction, intending to shepherd him from the hall, when another figure emerged from the dust clouds with a swagger. One of the stooping, gangly things had broken through the ranks of Librarians. It stared at Antros with a bulging, cyclopean eye, holding up a pair of rusty meat cleavers.

Psychic flame ripped from Antros' staff, tearing the daemon apart in an explosion of diseased flesh and pus-green blood.

Antros lowered his smoking staff and looked back to find the priest. The man was sprawled on the flagstones, clutching his severed throat as blood gushed from him in great gouts.

Antros rushed to aid him but another daemon lumbered into view, its jagged sword dripping with the priest's blood. Antros hunched over his staff and unleashed a blast of psychic wrath, smearing the second daemon across the wall.

Great hunks of stone were now crashing down all around him and the ceiling was almost entirely gone, revealing the soaring walkways and towers of the Librarium beyond. Column after column slumped and fell, and the two surviving Ministorum priests sprinted through the chaos, dodging falling slabs and leaping over cracks in the floor as they struggled to locate the exit. The hololithic projection of the senior priest was still visible through the bloody haze and falling rocks. He was howling in fear and rage, his eyes wild, but the speakers had been destroyed and he was once again mouthing into the void – a deranged, shimmering giant, presiding silently over the death of the ancient chamber.

Antros' enhanced vision saw easily through the haze, locating the doorway, just a dozen or so feet away.

'This way!' he cried, shepherding the dazed priests towards the exit. The door's lintel had cracked and the opening looked like it might give way at any moment.

He looked back to see a wall of daemons charging towards them, countless dozens of the loping horrors, approaching from all directions.

As the daemons flooded across the shattered flagstones, Antros raised his

staff, cutting them down with a scythe of psychic force and filling the air with gore.

Then he turned, grabbed the two priests by their robes and hauled them out into the light.

The scene outside the Ostensorio was almost as chaotic as the gruesome struggle taking place within it. The battle-brothers of the Fourth Company were racing towards the building, weapons raised, but as they climbed the steps the walls and buttresses started bulging and toppling. Captain Vatrenus and his Space Marines took aim as the cause of the destruction rose into view.

The enormous bulk of the daemon tore forwards, ripping open the roof of the Ostensorio as though it were wading through a low tide rather than demolishing a building the size of a cathedral. Huge hunks of crenellated marble collapsed beneath its bulk, tumbling down onto the Blood Angels below.

Captain Vatrenus roared a command and the air filled with bolter fire as daemons flooded through the broken doorway. Antros turned, but before he could reach the doorway, Lord Rhacelus and the rest of the Librarians emerged from the Ostensorio, covered in filth and dust, still hurling gouts of psychic energy as the monster crashed through the building above them. A low, tectonic groan filled the air, but it was not coming from the doorway. Mephiston was still crushed against the daemon's circular mouth, his blade burning red as it sank deeper into the thing's insubstantial flesh. The sound was coming from the point of contact. It was such a bass rumble that Antros could feel it resonating in his guts. Cracks started to spider out from the base of the Ostensorio, splitting the roads into shards of rockcrete and gaping chasms that opened up before the staggering Blood Angels.

The noise grew louder and the Ostensorio finally collapsed, thundering to the ground with all the fury of a landslide.

A tower of dust and flies reached up towards the heavens, blocking out the sun, like a doom-laden finger laying judgement on the screaming masses below.

As Antros fell backwards, his battleplate crushed beneath a tsunami of rubble and broken bodies, he caught a final glimpse of Mephiston. His ink-black wings were spread and he was soaring clear of the explosion, a

triumphant angel, his ivory face turned to the heavens, the daemon's severed head clutched in his fist.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Circle of Consonance, Arx Angelicum, Baal

The Quorum Empyrric had gathered deep in the undercroft of the Carceri Arcanum – the place Mephiston was most likely to be found when not ensconced in his own chambers. The gloomy, brick-built vaults were one of the oldest parts of the Librarium and they were a good match for his saturnine character – dark, labyrinthine and unwelcoming. It was also here that the Blood Angels kept their most dangerous relics, so it seemed a sensible place for the Chief Librarian to spend his hours. It was to Mephiston the Chapter Master would turn if any of the items locked in the Carceri were to ever gain their freedom.

The Quorum Empyrric was Mephiston's conclave of trusted advisors, consisting of his most powerful Librarians as well as other distinguished officers of the Chapter. These luminaries were seated around Mephiston on a circle of stone chairs in the central chamber of the undercroft, a meeting place known as the Circle of Consonance. They had been summoned to discuss the terrible events in the Ostensorio.

The ceiling of the undercroft had crumbled away many centuries earlier and a column of green, moss-infused light poured down from the halls above, giving the scene a subaqueous quality. Mephiston was staring into this emerald tower of light, studying dust motes as they flashed and danced. He seemed akin to the dust. The abyssal light made his sunken

features as ghoulish as anything in the surrounding crypts. He looked to Antros like a piece of carrion, preserved in chemicals for an esoteric rite.

If Antros had wished to, he could have used his enhanced vision to discern the distant, domed ceiling of the upper levels, hundreds of feet above. At present, however, he was oblivious to the tumbledown beauty of the ruined cellars; he was thinking instead of the elevated company he was keeping. The summons that Mephiston promised Antros on Thermia V had finally come, but he had not expected the meeting to be anything as grand as this.

He glanced around the circle, wondering if anyone would dare to question the Chief Librarian on the madness he had unleashed in the Ostensorio. Epistolary Rhacelus showed no sign of concern, of course, despite having locked horns with the behemoth that destroyed half the Ostensorio. Mephiston's equerry was as venerable and immobile as his ancient stone chair. He was watching the Chief Librarian with the same expression of haughty disdain he always wore – nostrils flared as though smelling something unpleasant, lip curled, one eyebrow raised. He was unarmoured but the lack of greaves and pauldrons did not make him any more human. He was as perfectly made as all Blood Angels. Beneath his simple red surplice, the iron-hard architecture of his massive, superhuman physique was visible, but, like all of his kind, he displayed a perfection that was almost disturbing when seen close up. He had the exaggerated, imperious features of a classical statue. Rhacelus was ancient, even by Blood Angels standards, and not above reminding his subordinates of the fact. Antros had heard him describe his role in conflicts that were footnotes in some of the Librarium's oldest texts. His white hair was oiled and gleaming, and the harsh angles of his jaw were softened by a short, silver beard, but the years had left a more unusual mark on him. So many centuries of staring into the immaterium had given his eyes a strange, cobalt sheen. They were iridescent like the eyes of a cat, flickering as though lit from behind. He raised his hand in a slow, regal movement and a scrum of robed blood thralls rushed from the shadows. He took a chalice from a proffered tray, sipped from it, then dismissed the servants with a wave of his finger.

Seated near the brothers of the Librarius was the veteran battle-brother who had admitted Antros to the Ostensorio: Captain Vatrenus. As Antros looked his way, he guessed that Vatrenus would be the one to challenge

Mephiston's actions. Unlike Epistolary Rhacelus, Captain Vatrenus could not hide his outrage at what had happened in the Ostensorio. There were a few fresh scratches on his Mark VII plate, but it was his face that showed the real impact of the fight. His jaw was jutting out and his deep-set eyes were simmering beneath his heavy brow. The idea that the Arx Angelicum could be attacked in such a way had left him wide-eyed with indignation.

For the moment, Captain Vatrenus held his ire in check, so Antros turned from the battle-brothers of the Fourth Company and looked at the one member of the Quorum Empyrric not seated in a chair. Scholiast Imola was the most senior Chapter-serf in the Librarium – oldest of all the scholiasts. The Chief Librarian had spoken often of Imola's fathomless wisdom and despite being a mortal she was regularly admitted to his inner council.

Imola's ancient form was preserved in an ornate, bronze casket called an embryon, which had been carried to the meeting in a mechanical palanquin that walked on dozens of hydraulic legs. The top of the palanquin was a seething nest of serpentine limbs, clad in ribbed steel and ending in a mixture of styluses, claws and lenses that cradled the little chest. The centre of the casket was filled with crimson liquid, but it was just possible to make out her small, foetal shape floating in the solution – pale, blind and suspended by rubber umbilical cords.

Antros turned his gaze to the other side of the circle, and the only non-Baalite members of the meeting. The emissaries of the Adeptus Ministorum lacked the martial perfection of the Space Marines, but they were imbued with another, equally potent power – a faith so furious that it inured them to the simple privations of the flesh. A mixture of passion and devotion radiated from their bleached faces, as vivid as the light shining from Rhacelus' eyes. Two of them were physically present and a third appeared in the form of a flickering hololith. The projected priest was the same senior prelate Antros had seen in the Ostensorio and he had been introduced to the quorum as Confessor Zin. Zin's image was hanging a few feet above the ground, at the centre of the circle of stone chairs. His likeness was now life-sized, rather than the colossal figure Antros had witnessed in the Ostensorio.

'My Lord Mephiston,' said Captain Vatrenus, unable to hold back his outrage any longer. 'We have assured you that all necessary measures have

been taken to secure the Ostensorio. Epistolary Rhacelus has spoken at great length of the psychic wards he has employed to seal the breach in real space and I have detailed the work of my squads.' His tone was bullish. 'Chief Librarian, will you explain what you were attempting? I do not understand much of what occurs in the Librarius, but this was more shocking than anything I have seen before. My lord,' he said, making no effort to hide his disapproval. 'What was so important that you would risk the sanctity of our fortress-monastery?'

Mephiston fixed his gaze on Captain Vatrenus. 'They were vermin,' he said quietly. 'Nothing more. The Arx Angelicum was never in danger.' His words flowed into each other, heavy with an odd mixture of accents, making it hard to catch his meaning.

'*Lord Mephiston,'* said the hololith of Confessor Zin, his jowly features trembling. '*Perhaps I could help illuminate your council on why you risked such hazardous methods?'*

Vatrenus looked appalled by the mere existence of the priest, but Mephiston gave him a vague nod.

Zin's eyes flashed triumphantly and he cast his gaze around the members of the quorum. '*Noble lords of the Librarius, Mephiston has admitted me into this most sagacious gathering because the time has come for plain speech. You should know that I have seen your master's name written in the funeral pyres of a thousand loyal souls. For nearly a decade, the God-Emperor has filled my dreams with visions of Mephiston, and Mephiston alone, calling me hither. Lords of the Librarius, you should know that it has been prophesied that Lord Mephiston is the Astra Angelus.'* Zin's hand trembled as he snatched a medallion hung around his neck and held it up as though it explained his words. The design was impossible to make out through the interference of the transmission, but he waved it at them as proof. '*Ten long years ago, the jewel of the Cronian sector, Divinus Prime, was stolen from the Light of the Emperor – snatched from the sight of even the most determined astropathic choirs. But it has been written in the blood of our holy martyrs that Mephiston will one day lead us back there – lead us to the site of our most hallowed shrines. What you saw in the Ostensorio was proof that this could be done. Mephiston has travelled through the immaterium* unaided.'

Captain Vatrenus glanced at Epistolary Rhacelus, disbelief clearly written

across his face. His eyes widened in shock as Rhacelus looked calmly back at him, confirming the priest's outlandish claim through silent assent.

Zin raised his voice, perhaps sensing the captain's doubt even from across the galaxy. '*Every one of my visions and prophecies has proven to be true. The ritual in the Ostensorio achieved something incredible and divine. Your lord travelled safely through the warp and located the stolen world of Divinus Prime. He has pinpointed the location of a place that the rest of the Imperium cannot even see.'*

Zin lowered the medallion and collapsed back in his chair, exhausted by his own fervour, looking expectantly at Mephiston to continue the tale.

The Chief Librarian remained silent and Zin leaned closer, triggering a burst of interference that sheared his head, creating a double-headed, shimmering phantom. '*Lord Mephiston, will you not tell us all what you saw? I have travelled across half the galaxy to see you. I have faced…'* His words faltered. '*I have faced things that I will not easily forget, and lost many friends, but I will reach Baal within days, Mephiston.'* His tone became desperate. *'And now that I am so close, I beg you to tell me what you have learned. You have achieved the impossible, but what did you see, my lord? I must know!'*

Antros bridled at the priest's tone. For a mortal to demand information from one of the Adeptus Astartes was shocking, but to speak in such a way to the Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels was incredible. Antros saw that he was not the only one to note the break with protocol. Captain Vatrenus' face had flushed a dangerous red and he had clenched his teeth together with the strain of staying quiet.

Mephiston remained motionless. He paid no attention to the priest and continued watching the spiralling dust with a cold, reptilian stillness.

'*Divinus Prime is no ordinary world!*' whispered Confessor Zin, attempting to snap Mephiston out of his reverie. '*I must know how we can recover it.'*

The two other priests echoed the words 'Divinus Prime' in awed whispers.

'*We are at the very gates of damnation, Astra Angelus,'* continued Zin. *'The very gates.*' He plucked a leather-bound book from his robes and began quoting from it, his voice shaking with passion. '*On the banks of the Esomino, before the walls of Volgatis, was His wrath made manifest!'*

‘His wrath,’ whispered the other priests.

‘*Five times five hundred were the foes he cast unto the earth,’* continued Zin. ‘*Five times five were the walls that toppled before his voice. Behold, the brazen beasts of the–’*

‘Confessor Zin,’ interrupted Mephiston, finally breaking his silence. There was something dangerous about his soft tones and the priests hushed. Then Mephiston seemed to notice something odd about his hand. It was clenched into a fist but Mephiston stared at it as though he had not willed his fingers to close. He paused, neglecting to finish his sentence as he slowly opened his fingers and placed his hand back on the arm of the chair.

‘*Yes?’* demanded Zin.

After a few seconds, Mephiston looked up from his hand and continued in the same flat, dispassionate voice. ‘You need not quote me the *Vicissitudes* in its entirety.’ There was no anger in his voice, just quietly stated fact. ‘I have read all five translations.’ He nodded at the book in Zin’s hand. ‘Uliarus missed most of the original intent but I have a copy of the Pindarus that I could lend you.’

Epistolary Rhacelus snorted in amusement but Zin’s disappointment changed to frustration. ‘*What did you see, Chief Librarian?*’ he snapped. *‘What did you* find? *You were gone for twelve days. What has happened to Divinus Prime?’*

‘This is too much,’ growled Captain Vatrenus, leaning forwards in his chair and glaring at Zin. ‘You will not speak to the Chief Librarian in such a way.’

Mephiston raised a hand and Antros saw that he was listening to a distant voice. He could even hear the exact words, lisping and hissing in his lord’s thoughts. They were spoken in ragged tones. *We are what our scars have made us. We are born in blood.* The words were accompanied by a familiar vision: the same lidless, flayed, veiled face Antros had seen on Thermia. The words and the face vanished as quickly as they came and Antros realised that he had read Mephiston’s thoughts again. The idea unnerved him. Mephiston’s mind was not for him to see. Such insight was heretical.

‘Your Cardinal World still exists, Confessor Zin,’ Mephiston said, looking at the priest directly for the first time and moving forwards so that light spilled across his face. Mephiston’s features must once have matched

the beauty of his battle-brothers, but his face was now a shattered death mask: a bleached collision of jagged angles and harsh lines, all pointing to his intense, unblinking eyes.

Zin's hololith squirmed and looked away, visibly shaken by Mephiston's gaze. '*Are you sure? Divinus Prime is safe?*'

Mephiston raised an eyebrow. 'Safe? No. It is not safe. Nothing in the Cronian Sector is safe, Confessor Zin. You of all people should know that. The Wars of Sanctitude are no nearer completion than when we began prosecuting them, a century ago. But…' He paused and looked into the shadows. 'But Divinus Prime still exists. I spent several hours there.' He frowned in distaste. 'It is a mess, like the rest of the sector.'

The priests made the sign of the aquila at this and looked aghast, and Confessor Zin stared across the galaxy, attempting to look Mephiston in the eye. Even as a projection, there was no mistaking his alarm.

'*Divinus Prime is hallowed ground,'* he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. '*It is forbidden to all… all but the most senior members of the Ecclesiarchy. With respect, my lord, you were never given permission to* go *there.*'

Aloof as he was, even Rhacelus balked at the words 'given permission'. 'You asked the Chief Librarian to find your world, Confessor Zin,' he drawled, not deigning to look at the priest, 'and he found it.' His words washed across the gathering, gravelly and languid. 'A little gratitude might suit you better than this disrespect.'

Zin's eyes widened in fear, but he bit back a reply. He looked at someone else in the strategium of the frigate that was hurling him towards Baal. He nodded and turned back to Mephiston. When he spoke again, it was with a more emollient tone. '*The priest I saw you holding in the sacristy, my lord – was he from Divinus Prime? Was he one of my own order?*'

Mephiston nodded. 'Prester Kohath.' The look of distaste remained on his face. 'A luckless pawn, caught up in a pointless schism, confused by his own transgressions.'

'*Transgressions? Schisms?*' exclaimed Zin. '*I assure you, Chief Librarian, there are no heretics on Divinus Prime. It is not possible*.'

Mephiston held up his hand. 'The sector is dancing to a tune not of our making, confessor. Would that it were otherwise.' He shrugged. 'But I did not say Prester Kohath was a heretic. The idea of heresy had barely taken

shape in his mind when I lifted him from his home.' Mephiston glanced past the hololith and looked directly at Antros.

Antros stiffened as Mephiston's corpse-cold eyes locked on to his, giving him the dreadful sensation that his soul was being flayed. Had the Chief Librarian sensed that Antros was prying into his thoughts? Had be brought him here to denounce him before the quorum as a heretic?

Antros tried to look calm as Rhacelus and the other Librarians watched him with grim countenances.

'*Then he still lives?*' asked Confessor Zin, ignorant of the glances being directed at Antros. '*You have a survivor from Divinus Prime here, in your Librarium?*' Hope kindled in his red-rimmed eyes and he clutched his medallion, mouthing a prayer. 'I would beg that you hand him over to my brethren immediately,' he said. 'And then you can fulfil the holy mission allocated to you by the God-Emperor himself, by showing me how I may find the banks of the Esomino, and the sacred gates of Volgatis.'

Mephiston continued to look at Antros. 'Prester Kohath glimpsed the corner of a truth and believed it to be dreadful, but truths are only dreadful when one is unable to understand the entire form.' He spoke in the same quiet, impenetrable tones he always used, but Antros had the horrible feeling he was being warned, perhaps even threatened.

'*Chief Librarian,*' groaned Zin. '*Do you realise how you're tormenting me? You talk of transgressions and schisms, while refusing to give me a direct answer. Can you lead us to Divinus Prime? We cannot simply abandon our brethren to the mysteries of the warp. The vow* must *be honoured. We must find a way to bring them home.*'

For the first time since the conclave began, Mephiston focused all of his attention on the priest. Something flickered in his eyes and he sat upright in his chair. 'The vow?'

Confessor Zin looked away with an awkward expression. '*Just like me, those poor souls on Divinus Prime swore a vow to serve the God-Emperor.*'

Mephiston fell quiet again, but this was a different kind of silence. He was staring at the sweating priest, his whole body rigid with concentration. He tilted his head back and a crimson sheen washed over his eyes. They became featureless red orbs, giving Mephiston an even more disturbing appearance. Confessor Zin looked anxiously to his unseen advisors for

guidance.

Mephiston blinked the blood from his eyes and looked at the two priests who were in the chamber. His whole demeanour had changed. The full, unnerving force of his gaze was now locked on the members of the quorum. It was as though he had emerged from a drug-induced haze.

When he spoke to Zin again, his voice was clear and distinct. 'The name Astra Angelus is unfamiliar to me, Confessor Zin, and I have never seen the banks of the Esomino, but your visions have not led you astray. I *do* see the world you have lost. And I may be willing to help. We will talk more when you reach Baal.'

Zin looked panicked as he realised he was being dismissed. '*Chief Librarian! I have not finished. I beg that you listen to–*'

Mephiston glanced at the hololithic projector and it died with a rattle of slowing cogs, ending Zin's plea mid-sentence.

As their prelate vanished from view, the two hooded priests rose to their feet. 'Lord Mephiston–' protested one of them.

Mephiston gave him a dark glance and the priest's words caught in his throat.

'This will require some careful thought,' said Mephiston. 'Rhacelus will summon you when I am ready.'

The ecclesiarchs backed away from their chairs, alarmed, as Mephiston stood, towering over them. Zin's brethren muttered anxiously as they were led away from the undercroft, shepherded down the crumbling colonnades of the Carceri Arcanum by one of Captain Vatrenus' battle-brothers.

Once the priests had left, Mephiston sat down in his chair and stared up through the ragged hole in the ceiling, studying the glittering dust motes again. He remained like that for several minutes and an awkward silence descended over the quorum.

Rhacelus spoke up. 'Chief Librarian, our failures in the Cronian Sector are no secret. The Wars of Sanctitude have claimed dozens of worlds and we still have no idea who is behind all these absurd schisms. And the Adeptus Ministorum know we are in the dark. Why have they approached you about Divinus Prime?'

Mephiston looked at his circle of advisors, as though noticing them for the first time. Then he shook his head. 'Rhacelus. What did you say?'

'Why have these priests approached you about the destruction of Divinus

Prime?'

'Destruction? Divinus Prime has not been destroyed, Epistolary Rhacelus, it has been stolen – plucked from the air like a conjuror's prop.' Mephiston clicked his long, tapered fingers and stared at them. 'And now Zin's visions have brought him to my door.'

Rhacelus laughed. 'You mean this Astra Angelus nonsense?'

Mephiston nodded. 'I do not recognise that title, but I *have* felt a call. A call similar to the one Zin has felt. I felt something long before Zin petitioned Commander Dante and asked to approach me. And I have seen other things. Other things that seem to concern Divinus Prime.' He glanced at Antros, as though expecting him to speak.

'My lord,' said Scholiast Imola. Her words were relayed through a vox-unit attached to the side of the embryon, emerging as a reedy, metallic whisper. 'I'm surprised to see Confessor Zin make such a fool of himself. He was practically lecturing you. Whatever affection he holds for this particular Cardinal World, it's strange even for a priest to behave quite so absurdly. What do you think has driven him to speak like that?'

Rhacelus let out another derisive snort. 'These ill-bred fanatics have no concept of manners or rank.' He watched the receding figures of the priests, sneering as they slipped from view. 'But then who does, these days? There was a time when the lower orders understood their place.'

'There is more to this Cardinal World than he's telling me, Scholiast Imola,' replied Mephiston. 'That's why he behaves so oddly. He's only giving me half a story. Which is why I went to see the place for myself.' He looked down at his hand, noticing that it was clenched into a fist again. With an odd grimace, he slowly spread his fingers. 'I must look into this further.'

With that, Mephiston dismissed the quorum. Captain Vatrenus and his men were ordered back to the Ostensorio to continue the slow, careful work of reconsecrating the ruins, while most of the Librarians headed back to their own chambers. Mephiston requested the presence of Antros and Rhacelus in his private quarters.

As they left the undercroft and travelled up through the Carceri Arcanum, heading back towards the upper levels of the Librarium, Epistolary Rhacelus held up a hand to Mephiston, signalling that he wished to speak

with him alone. Mephiston waved Antros on and the two old warriors stepped through an archway into a shadowy antechamber at the side of the passageway.

They were in a part of the Carceri Arcanum called the Sacellum of Lineaments: a maze of galleries, designed to illustrate the incredible variety of xenos species crushed by the Chapter since the earliest days of the Great Crusade. Each chamber was lined with rows of marble plinths and on top of each plinth was a bust, carefully sculpted to resemble the head of a bested alien foe. The Blood Angels employed only the most skilled artisans and the busts were terrifying in their realism. Rhacelus and Mephiston came to a halt near the head of a huge, one-eyed raptor, its cruel beak open in an eternal, soundless scream.

Rhacelus looked around the room and when he was sure they were alone, his habitually scornful expression softened a little. He clasped the shoulder pad of Mephiston's battleplate and leant close to him. 'Tell me the truth, Calistarius.' His strange eyes flickered with concern. 'I have not seen you since Thermia. Is it getting worse?'

Mephiston's expression remained as impenetrable as ever, but he did not reprimand Rhacelus for using his old name, which Rhacelus took as a good sign.

Mephiston slowly removed one of his gauntlets and held up his hand.

Rhacelus muttered a curse as he saw that Mephiston's skin was rippling with dark fire. Black, brittle flames danced across his knuckles and sparked between his fingers. In places, the darkness had entirely replaced the skin, turning Mephiston's hand into a ghostly shadow.

'What is this?' asked Rhacelus.

'The Gift. It has been like this since Thermia,' said Mephiston. 'It will no longer leave me, Rhacelus, even when I am calm. It is there, constantly. Even now it is battling within me.' He closed his eyes and the darkness faded. 'I can barely control it any more. It grows more powerful by the day but the more I struggle with it, the more I…' He held up his hand, leaving wisps of shadow in the air as he moved it. 'The more I try to suppress the Gift, the more it consumes me. And it's not just my flesh that is changing. My mind is growing darker too. I'm intoxicated by it, Rhacelus. *Intoxicated.*'

Rhacelus stared at Mephiston's odd, smouldering skin. 'But what of

Divinus Prime? Do you see hope there or not? Did all those visions mean nothing? You told me someone was calling to you.'

Mephiston stared at his hand for a little longer, then muttered an oath and shoved his gauntlet back on. 'Someone *is* calling me, I'm sure of it. I hoped to find a clear answer there, or perhaps a clue to the problems in the Cronian Sector, but I knew after just a few hours that I had made a pointless journey. After all these visions and messages, Divinus Prime was just another bloodbath – believers killing believers over some detail of religious doctrine, just as confusing as the rest of the Cronian Sector. I have to admit, I returned here baffled, old friend. Neither of my hopes turned out to be true. I found no link between Divinus Prime and the Gift, and I found nothing that could point us to the architect of all these insurgencies.'

Mephiston frowned. 'But now, after listening to Zin's gibberish, I think perhaps the visions *do* have some worth. Perhaps I missed something on Divinus Prime, something crucial. There might be a way after all.'

Rhacelus shook his head, confused. 'A way to harness the Gift?'

'A way to *unleash* it.' A rare flicker of passion transformed Mephiston's face. 'A way to become the weapon the Angel wished me to be. A way to fulfil my destiny. To truly grasp what I have been given and finally name it friend or foe.' Mephiston turned his gaze to the stone bust, staring at the one-eyed eagle. 'Do you remember this?' he asked. 'Do you remember the Battle of Khatan?'

Rhacelus laughed, a deep booming sound that echoed through the halls. 'I'm not likely to forget it. You didn't show much distinction between friend and foe that day.'

Mephiston nodded. 'Even then I realised the truth, the possibilities.' He held out a hand and allowed the dark flames to envelop his gauntlet. 'I must believe this power comes from the Angel. I *have* to. But until now, I have never discussed the Gift with anyone but you, Rhacelus.'

Rhacelus blanched. 'Until now? Calistarius, are you going to discuss this with others? Is that wise?' He looked around the chamber again, checking they were still alone. 'Tell me it will not be Captain Vatrenus. Vatrenus is a good warrior, but he is no scholar. Even after all these decades, I barely understand half of what you have told me of the Gift – imagine how it could seem to him. And remember why he has a place in the quorum. If

Vatrenus were to put this in one of his reports to the commander, you would be ruined. The last thing Dante wants is to castigate you, Calistarius, but this is just the kind of thing that might force him to.'

Mephiston shook his head. 'Not Vatrenus. Antros.'

Rhacelus stepped back, incredulous. 'Why in the God-Emperor's name would you share such a thing with *Lucius?* He's barely earned the right to wear his armour.' Rhacelus looked around the chamber, ensuring that Antros was not in earshot. 'How can you expect him to understand? If I am not sufficient to the task, how can he be? If you really need another confidant, there are better options. Why would you choose him?'

Mephiston spoke with an uncharacteristic note of emotion. 'You are my only friend in this galaxy, Gaius – my *only* friend. I trust you even when I do not trust myself. I would never have chosen to share this with another, but it was not a choice. He has *seen*. When I thought everything was lost, on Thermia Five, he saw into my soul. He even saw the skinless woman that has been calling to me. She is the key to all of this, I know it. I think she may be the one infecting that whole sector with thoughts of sedition and heresy. Some champion of the Ruinous Powers, perhaps. And maybe Antros can help me discover who she is. He is…' He shook his head, unsure how to continue.

'Calistarius,' said Rhacelus, 'he has power, I do not deny it.' He shrugged. 'No aspirant ever showed such promise before Insanguination and since then he has been even more driven. But I have doubts about him. He is so ambitious. So eager to race ahead. There is a rebellious streak in him, a lack of respect.' He shook his head. 'He should not have even been in the Ostensorio yesterday. And he knows that. I never summoned him to the rite. Neither did you. So why was he there? He lacks discipline, Calistarius. I know he is gifted but–'

'He is gifted in a way we had not foreseen, Gaius, in a way I still do not understand. Something happened on Thermia that created a nexus between us, joining my thoughts to his.' Mephiston studied the black flames licking across his battleplate. 'I cannot tell if it will be for good or ill, but Antros has found his way into my future. Our fates are bound.'

CHAPTER SIX

The Diurnal Vault, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Time was frozen in the Diurnal Vault, trapped forever by the agonies of a dying star. As Lexicanium Antros entered he was left purblind by the majesty of the immense chamber. His Adeptus Astartes eyes quickly adjusted to the glare, but even then he could see little – vast, blazing pillars of light, hanging overhead, so tall that their summits vanished out of sight. The vault was built on a scale that defied physics. It could not, by any normal rules of science, exist within the confines of the Librarium. And yet here it was, existing.

At the centre of the hall was Idalia, beautiful guardian of a million ideas. She burned endlessly, crimson and furious in her stone prison – a caged star, bound by wards so powerful that no living Librarian could untie them. The star was only forty feet across, crushed, it was said, by the will of the Emperor Himself, but she was embedded in the chest of a truly monolithic statue: a towering, winged angel, resting one hand on the pommel of a sword the size of a cathedral, and holding the other aloft, palm upwards. Whatever the truth of Idalia's capture, she retained enough brilliance to illuminate every inch of the colossal statue. Generators, conductors and valves hummed as they distributed her power through growling banks of voltaic batteries, then out across black, Baalite stone. She pumped crimson fire into a dazzling arterial network and the light was

greatest as it reached the statue's open palm. Hovering above the hand were three enormous red gemstones. These towering slabs of crystal seemed to be merely beautiful, but Antros knew the truth. The Crimson Tears contained millions of texts, visible only to the most potent psykers. Even after his years of training, Antros could barely discern the volumes they contained. Thanks to Idalia, the Crimson Tears floated gracefully through the chamber, attended by flocks of winged servitors, servo-skulls and cherubs who flitted across their facets, cataloguing, studying and reciting, adding their chattering voices to the din.

At the sight of the statue Antros staggered to a halt. It was like meeting Sanguinius himself, so great was the likeness. A powerful mix of emotions washed over him. Once he had recovered his composure Antros looked around, fascinated by the wonders that surrounded him. There was no time to explore, though. Epistolary Rhacelus was right behind him and Mephiston's equerry was watching him with an even more disapproving expression than usual. Up ahead of them was Mephiston, barely recognisable as he drifted through the tumult, silhouetted before the distant face of the statue, his cloak shimmering in Idalia's heat haze.

As he stepped further into the chamber, Antros' feet lifted from the ground. Idalia preserved the books from the depredations of the centuries, but she also played other games. Antros could not help smiling as he slipped the bonds of gravity and swam through the air after Mephiston.

Rhacelus followed as Mephiston led them up past the statue's chest towards its blazing heart. Antros managed to keep his eye locked on Mephiston as he drifted through crowds of cherubs and passed through an ornate, marble doorway, buried in one of the statue's wings.

Antros followed him into a much smaller chamber and, as he crossed the threshold, gravity threw him to the floor. He landed easily, with a wheeze of servos and hydraulics.

Mephiston melted away into the shadows and Antros looked around at the gloomy scriptorium they had entered. Hooded servitors were dotted around the edges of the room ensconced in tall, stone alcoves, hunched over flickering screens and scratching away at wax tablets with metal styluses. They were transcribing the glyphs displayed on the screens and, as they wrote, the wax tablets slowly reproduced the text on scrolls of illuminated vellum, decorated in vibrant red ink. At first glance, Antros

thought the servitors were merely seated, but then he saw that their bodies were meshed with the machines. The top halves were humanoid, but that ended at the waist, where they became one with the whirring, humming cogitators.

Rhacelus dropped into the chamber and looked at one of the alcoves on the far side of the room. It was a pool of shadow, but he clearly saw something of interest. 'Is that him?' he asked, his strange blue eyes reflecting the candlelight. 'The heretic?'

'I would not use that word.' Mephiston strode over to the alcove, followed by Rhacelus. 'But yes, this is my guest.'

Antros followed and saw that the alcove contained an ecclesiarch, chained to an ornate brass rack. His hair had been ceremonially shaved at the front, just like the priests Antros had seen in the Carceri Arcanum, and he clearly belonged to the same order, but his robes were filthy and torn. He had obviously survived some terrible ordeal. His face was as bloodless as Mephiston's and his tonsured hair was matted with gore. And his trials were clearly not over. The rack was laced with bundles of wires and cables, most of which threaded under his skin. He looked like a diagram of a man, spread-eagled and surrounded by a fan of rubbery black tubing. Dark, viscous liquid was pumping through the tubes into his body. His eyes were closed but he was far from peaceful, muttering and flinching as he slept.

'What have you done to him?' Antros was intrigued by the intricate, cosmological symbols drawn over the man's skin.

Mephiston's face was as emotionless as ever, but Rhacelus glared. 'Address your Chief Librarian with respect, neophyte.' Rhacelus had completed Antros' training. He knew Antros had not been a neophyte for several years, but still seemed to enjoy taunting him with the term.

'Forgive me, my lord,' said Antros.

'This is Prester Kohath,' said Mephiston, oblivious to Antros' breach of etiquette. 'He was seconds from death when I lifted him from Divinus Prime. When I found him he was making his way through a ruined temple, seeking the company of cultists, unaware that they were all about to be destroyed by their own ordnance.' Mephiston tapped one of the display screens, peering at the cascading figures. 'In saving him from the Cronian Sector, I almost destroyed him.' He glanced at Antros. 'Part of what you see here is my attempt to keep him alive.'

‘Why bring him back, my lord?’ Rhacelus looked at the unconscious priest with obvious distaste. ‘You said he was seeking cultists. Surely a swift execution would have been more appropriate?’

‘He is a piece of Divinus Prime,’ said Mephiston. ‘A link to that wretched world. And something told me that a way back might be useful.’

‘Lord Mephiston,’ said Antros. ‘What convinced you to visit Divinus Prime? Epistolary Rhacelus is right – none of our campaigns in the Cronian Sector have come to anything. Every time we stop one civil war another two spring up in its place.’

‘Confessor Zin came here specifically to ask him to go,’ said Rhacelus. ‘He begged the Chief Librarian to discover what has become of this specific Cardinal World. Something about the loss of Divinus Prime has forced him to approach us for help.’

‘But the world has not been lost?’ asked Antros.

Mephiston shook his head. ‘Merely hidden.’ He waved them over to a circular desk at the back of the scriptorium. Its surface was unadorned but at a wave of Mephiston’s hand it flickered into life, flooding the chamber with blue light and a swirl of stars. Mephiston pointed at a ghostly shadow near the centre of the sector map. ‘I was intrigued by this phenomenon long before Zin’s communiques arrived.’ He placed his hand over the strange anomaly. ‘It is impossible to contact Divinus Prime by any normal means. I felt the death agonies of entire astropathic choirs when they tried. And the Imperial fleet could scour the Cronian Sector for centuries without finding anything. Even if I ignore the voice that has been calling me there, I find this anomaly interesting. It is clearly the work of whatever or whoever is behind all the other uprisings and schisms.’ He closed his fist around the projection. ‘I only managed to project a sliver of my being, a simulacrum. I could not hold my place there for long, but I had enough time to perform the Second Rite of the Ensanguined. I mingled my blood with the flesh of Divinus Prime.’ He looked at the priest on the rack. ‘And brought a little of that flesh back with me.’

‘What have you learned from him?’ asked Antros.

Mephiston shrugged. ‘Nothing. He has been like this since I dragged him through the warp.’ Mephiston stepped closer to the rack and examined the dials and gauges that punctuated its brass frame. ‘But something in Zin’s ramblings made me think Divinus Prime *is* worth further thought. The

time has come to try again.'

Mephiston summoned his personal chirurgeon over. The serf scuttled out from the shadows, carried on a rippling skirt of needle-like legs. He was a walking collection of surgical devices arrayed around a few vestigial scraps of humanity. The man had been so heavily augmented that he looked more arachnid than human. His long, segmented forelimbs clattered against the dials of the machine with no obvious result. Then he droned a few prayers before plunging a needle into the priest's thigh.

Kohath slumped in his bonds, hanging limply from the metal frame.

'Is he dead?' asked Rhacelus, more irritated than concerned.

The chirurgeon shook his head, shaking an oily mane of cables. He had a round, whiskered face and wide, unblinking eyes, and as he prodded Kohath he rubbed some of his syringe-tipped fingers over his robes, fidgeting and nervous. 'No. Lord Rhacelus,' he replied, his voice punctuated by a series of moist clicking sounds. 'That is not the case. I do not think that is the case. At least. At least. If it is the case. I do not think–'

Prester Kohath woke up with a scream. He jolted against his restraints, thrashing wildly, trying to free himself. His terrified stare was locked on Mephiston.

'Daemon!' he howled, spittle flying from his lips. 'Warp spawn! Get away from me! In the name of the Throne!'

'Aphek,' said Mephiston and the chirurgeon raised its forest of clicking limbs into the air, before selecting a second syringe.

The priest lashed out at the servitor as it approached, but Aphek dodged the blows and plunged the needle home.

Prester Kohath slumped again, but this time his eyes remained open and he ceased his screaming. The sedative drained the fury from his face, leaving the wry, cynical leer of a drunk. He studied Mephiston with derision and slurred: '*We are what our scars have made us*.' He laughed, as though enjoying his own wit. '*We are born in blood.*'

The chirurgeon backed away, surprised, shaking his head and making another series of clicking noises.

Mephiston stared at Prester Kohath as he continued laughing to himself. The Chief Librarian looked surprised by the words and they filled Antros with an inexplicable chill. They were the words he had heard on Thermia

as Mephiston butchered and burned.

'He's still in there,' said Mephiston. 'Or at least part of him is. He's a child of Divinus Prime. His flesh knows the way home, even if his mind does not. Let me take a closer look at what he's seeing.'

Mephiston drew his rune-inscribed force sword and Antros thought he was about to behead the man. But, instead of swinging the sword, Mephiston dragged the tip of the blade across the man's cheek. Kohath continued babbling drunkenly as Mephiston drew a small line of blood. Mephiston brought the sword tip to his mouth and licked the blood from the blade, shivering slightly as he swallowed. Then he gripped the sword handle in both hands, placed its point on the floor and nodded his head against the hilt, closing his eyes as he muttered an incantation.

The blade pulsed red, humming like a badly earthed electrical device. Then a breeze whipped along the bookcases and pict displays, extinguishing the candles and leaving just the cold blue light of the screens. After a few seconds they too began to fade, causing the rows of servo-scribes to stop writing and look up in surprise. Some of their hoods fell back and Antros saw that they had no faces – the fronts of their heads were as smooth and featureless as the backs. The last screen died but he could still sense the faceless servo-scribes in the dark, twitching and straining towards him.

Prester Kohath continued muttering and laughing as blood trickled down his cheek and the scriptorium fell into darkness.

The sanguine glow from Vitarus was enough for Antros to discern the towering silhouettes of Mephiston and Rhacelus looming over the rack. The Chief Librarian still had his head resting against the handle of his sword and both battle-brothers were so motionless they could have been part of the architecture.

'The sky,' exclaimed Prester Kohath, ceasing his gibberish and speaking in a soft, quiet voice. 'Peculiar. Like nothing I've seen.'

Antros recognised the odd mix of accents and realised Mephiston was now speaking through the priest. He had possessed him.

Prester Kohath looked directly at Antros, his eyes changing to a deep, bloody red. They flickered like votives in the dark as Mephiston continued speaking through his captive. 'Zin's priests are butchering each other. Another pointless holy war. A genocidal schism over some subtle point of

doctrine. There's a fortress. Volgatis. A convent. All the bloodshed stems from there. The ecclesiarchs are killing each other for possession of it.' The man chained to the rack shook his head, confused. 'Kohath doesn't even know why. None of them know why. Kohath just knows that the convent is divine – and that it must be saved. No, wait, he thinks it must not be saved. He does not know who to believe. He is–'

Kohath screamed again, jerking against his chains as the red light vanished from his eyes. His screams became ragged coughs and blood bubbled between his lips as he thrashed from side to side. He shouted 'Born in blood!' repeatedly until Aphek clattered forwards and sedated him again, sending him back into a fitful sleep.

The candles flickered back into life and Mephiston lifted his head from the handle of his sword. There was an intrigued expression on his face and Antros sensed that he had seen more than he had shared with them. 'He's on the verge of collapse. I can push him no further.'

'And what will you say to that baseborn oaf, Zin?' asked Rhacelus. 'If we must endure another meeting with the cretin, can you at least disabuse him of his romantic ideas about Divinus Prime?'

Mephiston glanced up into the shadows, studying the ranks of gilt-edged books that lined the walls. 'Take word to Captain Vatrenus, Rhacelus. When Confessor Zin lands, they should escort him to the Ostensorio. I will meet him there.'

Rhacelus' strange blue eyes flashed in the half-light. 'The Ostensorio? Are you sure, Mephiston? It's ruined. One false step and the whole place might come down.'

Mephiston glanced at the star chart that was still hovering over the desk. 'The Ostensorio, Rhacelus.'

Rhacelus hesitated briefly, then clanged his sword against his chest armour and marched from the scriptorium, leaving Antros alone with the Chief Librarian.

Without a word, Mephiston strode off down a vaulted passageway, heading towards his private chambers and clearly expecting Antros to follow. Antros felt a rush of elation. His private audience with Mephiston had finally come. He hurried after him, intrigued to know where they were headed. The Chief Librarian's inner sanctums were a mystery to all but an elect few of the Chapter's most senior officers.

The passageway broadened and then reached a dead end. Facing them was a tear-drop-shaped alcove, eight or nine feet tall, and set in the recess was a candlelit shrine. The shrine centred on a golden, haloed death mask, fixed to the top of a marble plinth, glinting in the flickering light. Even in death, it was clear that the original wearer of the mask must have been strikingly beautiful. His expression was wonderfully serene, as though he had died in a state of utter oneness with the universe.

Mephiston lifted the golden mask and pressed it to his face. He only wore it for a second, but when he placed it back on its stand, his face was punctured with hundreds of tiny cuts.

As the mask clicked back into place, it rattled slightly and opened its eyes, revealing two featureless white orbs. Upon seeing Mephiston, the mask's tranquil expression vanished and the face crumpled into a bestial snarl, jolting on its base and forming its mouth into a silent howl.

Antros was about to ask for an explanation when the shrine dropped back into the wall, taking the tormented mask with it and leaving an open doorway onto nothing. Damp, cool air rushed out to meet them and Antros stepped closer, peering into the void.

'The Sepulcrum Maleficus,' said Mephiston, stepping through the doorway and vanishing from sight.

Antros followed and found himself on a curved, metal stairway, wrought of interlocking metal plates, that plunged down into the shadows. He could see very little, but the hulking form of Mephiston was just a few steps lower and he hurried after him.

Mephiston waved one of his hands, describing a lazy circle above his head. Lights sprang to life in answer to his gesture – torches, housed in winged, golden sconces, fixed to the walls of a tall, cylindrical atrium. The top of the atrium was so far away that Antros thought he could make out the stars of a distant night sky. Then he looked down and saw that there was no floor – the network of interlinked metal stairs hung over an abyss. The stairs were slowly rotating – vast hoops moving in stately, sweeping arcs, intersecting like the rings of an enormous orrery, but rather than carrying planets, the circular stairs carried elaborately sculpted sarcophagi, swinging them through the darkness like heavenly bodies.

'The Sepulcrum Maleficus?' whispered Antros. 'I do not recall that name, my lord.'

‘My resting place, Lexicanium, and the resting place of my predecessors. Our place of communion, where we come to share thoughts. Although their gene-seed has been removed, their wisdom remains.’ As they passed the ivory caskets, Antros glimpsed names of great renown – long-dead heroes of the Librarius, their imposing sarcophagi decorated with ornate scrollwork, warded with liturgies and runes.

Mephiston paused beside one of the tombs and placed a hand on the cold ivory. ‘Chief Librarian Asterion,’ he said. Antros sensed that the words were not directed at him but at the dead hero in the coffin. It sounded like Mephiston was greeting him. As he continued on down the steps, Mephiston muttered, ‘He will not be here long.’ Again, Antros sensed he was talking to ghosts.

They reached a circular platform at the centre of the atrium. It was open to a sheer drop on all sides but at its centre there was a cluster of tall, claw-armed chairs, gathered around a gilded table.

Mephiston waved Antros to one of the chairs and, as Antros sat down, a man stepped from one of the orbiting staircases and began removing Mephiston’s armour. Mephiston had not had a chance to clean his battleplate since the fight in the Ostensorio and it was caked in blood and filth. As Mephiston’s artificer worked, Antros watched the man with interest, wondering what kind of soul would inhabit such an austere place. He was dressed in thick, crimson robes, embroidered with an intricate pattern of glyphs and runes, and he was clearly more than just a simple blood thrall. His frame was as powerful as one of the Adeptus Astartes and, when Antros caught a glimpse of the man’s face, he saw that his eyes had been removed, leaving two puckered scars.

The blind artificer unclasped Mephiston’s plates of ribbed armour, whispering prayers as he worked. The prayers were accompanied by the wheeze of hydraulics as he carefully removed the slabs of ceramite to be polished and venerated. As Mephiston’s scarred, corpse-grey limbs were revealed, Antros noticed something odd. Sections of the Chief Librarian’s skin were shimmering and dark, as though consumed by a black fire. He was falling into shadow.

Mephiston saw Antros looking at his arm and frowned. ‘What have you learned?’ he asked, covering his skin and signalling for the artificer to leave.

Antros was unsure if Mephiston was speaking to him or the corpses.

Mephiston gave him an unreadable look. ‘Regarding Divinus Prime. Did Rhacelus not pass on my order?’

Antros hesitated. How could a mere Lexicanium hope to advise Mephiston?

‘You found nothing,’ said Mephiston.

‘Very little,’ Antros admitted. ‘The Cronian Sector is so awash with warring sects that nothing is recorded with any diligence. The Wars of Sanctitude seem so pointless it is not always clear who’s fighting whom. Some of the cults have been isolated for so long that they barely follow the Imperial Creed. There is so much superstition. So much mythologising. It is hard to find concrete facts.’

Mephiston, dressed now in a simple habit, began plucking books from the room’s single bookcase. It was beautifully made, a set of tall shelves, carved from the same ivory as the sarcophagi and holding an eclectic mix of military treatises and history books, as well as a few battered data-slates and auspexes. On the top shelf was a small shrine to the Angel Sanguinius, and another object that caught Antros’ eye: an ugly little splinter of rubble, placed in a gold casket as though it were the most revered relic in the Librarium. He recognised it straight away: it was a piece of the ruined fist he had seen on Thermia, a relic of the dreadful scene that had thrown them together. Mephiston saw him looking at it but said nothing, signalling for him to continue.

‘As you know, Divinus Prime is even more of an enigma than the other Cardinal Worlds in the sector,’ Antros continued. ‘It seems to me that the ecclesiarchs were hiding it for long before this recent vanishing trick.’ He clicked a data-slate from his armour and scanned through the meagre notes on its screen, ‘Nobody is *ever* given permission to land. The last secular visit I could find mention of was thirteen centuries ago.’ He peered at the data-slate. ‘The Terran poet, Pindarus.’

Mephiston paused at the mention of the poet, mouthed a few stanzas of his work, then continued studying his book.

‘There was nothing in any of the usual texts,’ said Antros.

Mephiston nodded.

‘But I did find one morsel of information.’

Mephiston looked up, surprised.

‘It was very little, just the briefest of mentions in some old breviaries. Apparently, the man who acts as planetary governor is a senior priest called Arch-Cardinal Dravus. He has a rather antiquated title – the Lord-Ministrant Proconsul of Divinus Prime. He’s the head of an Imperial cult called the Children of the Vow.’ He shook his head, scrolling through the notes again. ‘I could find no mention of that cult anywhere else. It seems to have been deliberately obscured.’

Mephiston stared at Antros in silence. Then he rose from his chair and returned to the bookshelves. ‘The Children of the Vow,’ he muttered, pulling another book down and flicking through the pages. ‘That’s it,’ he said, with surprising urgency. ‘The *Vow*. How did I miss that?’

Mephiston spent the next ten minutes reading intently and speaking under his breath in languages Antros could not understand. It sounded like a jumble of different tongues, as though many people were speaking at once. Antros wondered if he was expected to leave. He rose to go and then paused at the bottom of the steps. ‘My lord,’ he said. ‘In the Ostensorio…’

Mephiston continued staring at the book and replied in vague, distracted tones. ‘You are no longer a neophyte, Antros. You will witness many such things in years to come.’

‘I understand. But I was not talking of the things that followed you. When you returned to the Librarium you said something, in my mind, just before they attacked. You talked about finding an answer. What did you mean by that? An answer to what?’ He hesitated, aware that such questions might be another break with protocol. ‘Were you referring to the events on Thermia?’

Mephiston looked up and stared at Antros. Black flames shimmered across his palms, throwing odd shadows over his face. ‘I *spoke*,’ he said quietly, ‘in your mind?’

Antros sensed he had made a mistake. ‘I thought so. Was I wrong?’

Mephiston stepped towards him and the darkness followed, billowing like smoke, so that he seemed even larger than his already massive Adeptus Astartes frame. Without a word, he reached out and pressed the tip of his finger firmly against Antros’ forehead. The black fire was rippling across Mephiston’s skin and Antros’ instinct was to recoil, but Mephiston’s touch was corpse-cold. It was also dreadfully significant, like an accusation.

Mephiston frowned, removed his finger from Antros’ skin and backed

away. Then he sat down again and looked out at the vast atrium, staring at the slowly rotating sarcophagi. He spoke quietly, using words Antros could not understand and nodding slightly, as though someone were replying.

'What you saw on Thermia caught me by surprise,' Mephiston said suddenly, still looking away from Antros.

As usual, there was no hint of emotion in his voice, but the words alone were enough to give Antros pause. Surprise? Mephiston was infallible. Inhuman. The omnipotent lord of the Librarius. Surely he saw all ends?

'Chief Librarian,' said Antros. 'I fear that my behaviour on Thermia has made you doubt me. I was babbling when I spoke of visions. What I saw was a glorious victory. You were unstoppable.'

Mephiston leant back in his chair. 'Unstoppable? Yes, Antros, as you saw, I could not be stopped.'

The conversation both excited and troubled Antros. Had he said something wrong? Or had he impressed his lord in some way? He had never heard of Mephiston confiding in any other Lexicani like this, but it felt more like a trial than an honour – as though the Chief Librarian were drawing him close through doubt rather than trust. He could not tell whether this conversation was leading to unexpected promotion or unexpected death.

'The battle at the pit left me with unanswered questions,' Mephiston said, 'as I'm sure it did you. But perhaps the devout Confessor Zin has given us an answer, in the form of Divinus Prime.'

'You mean to go back?' Antros said.

'I do. And I do not intend to go alone.'

'Confessor Zin would do anything to stop you returning.'

'He would do anything to find Divinus Prime, and his choice of guides is limited.' Mephiston glanced at the shrine to the Angel. 'I have anchored my soul to that world. The transmigration between realities will be faster and more permanent. I have the skill to do what lesser minds would consider impossible. I will cross the immaterium.'

He raised one of his hands and a sphere of dust formed above his palm. Antros leant closer as the dust became a planet, turning slowly in the void. It was caged by a spiral of serpentine clouds but looked otherwise normal. The miniature world was so accurately drawn from Mephiston's memory that he could even make out its oceans and continents.

‘Zin is either lying or being lied to. Someone has deliberately hidden Divinus Prime from him. That much is plain. There is an architecture to this mystery, a *design*.’

He waved his hand and the image dissolved. ‘It is one of the things that intrigued me about the place. I had already consulted with the Chapter Council and petitioned Commander Dante for guidance. I need to…’ He paused, and Antros glimpsed a flicker of emotion in his eyes – hunger perhaps. ‘I cannot place the source of these visions. I do not know who is calling to me. But I am sure of this – there are things on Divinus Prime too precious to be simply revered.’

Antros was about to reply when Mephiston waved him away. ‘Return to your tower, Lexicanium. Set your scholars to work. Tell me who they are, these Children of the Vow.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

Librarium Sagrestia, Arx Angelicum, Baal

A week had passed since Mephiston's return from Divinus Prime and the subsequent destruction of the Ostensorio. Lexicanium Antros had spent every moment attempting to fulfil the Chief Librarian's request. He had unearthed dozens of volumes concerning the shrine worlds of the Cronian Sector and the Imperial cults that held sway there. Despite Antros' earlier doubts about his most senior serf, Scholiast Ghor, she had proven useful. Ghor had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the books stored in the Orbicular Tower, whereas, for Antros, much of his new demesne was still a mystery. And yet, for all their searching, they had failed to unearth another mention of the Children of the Vow.

On this particular morning he found Ghor walking through the damask-lined halls of the Orbicular Tower, talking earnestly with some of the rubricators. Her tall, emaciated frame dwarfed the other scribes and they resembled a kind of chattering train, billowing in her wake as they passed by the thick, embroidered drapes that covered the walls.

At the sight of Antros, the junior scribes bowed awkwardly and scurried away, leaving Dimitra to face him alone. She looked as ferociously gaunt as ever, eyes sunk deep in their dark sockets and skin like old vellum. She greeted him with a slow, respectful bow.

'Lexicanium,' she said. She looked ashamed as she passed a pile of books

into his hands. ‘These are the final few breviaries that speak of Divinus Prime. There is no mention of a vow in any of them.’

He shook his head. ‘And our time is up. The Chief Librarian means to return to Divinus Prime and I will be travelling with him.’

Dimitra glanced nervously at him. ‘My lord, I heard rumours of what happened in the Ostensorio. The Chief Librarian has immense power at his command, I understand that, but do you think such methods of transportation are really–?’

Antros halted her question with a warning glance. ‘The Chief Librarian sees all ends,’ he said firmly.

‘The Chief Librarian sees all ends,’ she echoed, but the concern remained in her ink-dark eyes.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘there *was* something odd about those books that I thought I should mention. It may be nothing, but there was a code – a kind of cryptograph that was common to all of them.’ She took one of the books back and opened it, tracing her finger over the faded print. ‘Some of the illuminated capitals feature this strange symbol,’ she said. ‘Can you see? A crossbar of some kind, or an upside down T.’

Antros nodded. ‘I see it.’

‘Well, the odd thing is that if you take the marked capitals and read them in reverse order, they seem to spell a name. It sounds like the name of a relic or a weapon, but it is not mentioned anywhere else.’

‘What is the name?’

She gave him a hopeful look. ‘The Blade Petrific. Have you heard of such a thing?’

She looked disappointed as Antros shook his head.

Dimitra frowned and handed him the book. ‘No, nor I. And it is not mentioned in the other breviaries. There is an impressive cloud of secrecy around Divinus Prime. I have never seen anything quite like it.’ She nodded at the crumbling books. ‘I hope you find whatever they are hiding.’

‘Who?’

‘The ecclesiarchs. I presume they are hiding something from the Chief Librarian.’

Antros laughed, his booming tones disrupting the quiet industry that surrounded them. The scholars and scribes visible through every archway ceased their copying and looked up, stealing a glimpse at their lord.

‘I do not believe it is possible to hide anything from the Chief Librarian,’ he said. ‘I would not profess to know what game he’s playing with the Adeptus Ministorum, but I know who holds all the cards.’

Dimitra’s angular features were briefly softened by a smile. ‘Agreed.’

She bowed and made to leave, then paused. ‘My lord,’ she said.

He nodded for her to continue.

She shook her head, embarrassed, and seemed to regret speaking, then she steeled herself and said, ‘I have been asked questions about you.’

‘Questions? By whom?’

She licked her thin lips and glanced over her shoulder before continuing in hushed tones. ‘Servants of the Chief Librarian’s equerry.’

Antros felt a rush of indignation as he sensed that she was impugning Rhacelus. ‘I have no time for gossip, Scholiast Ghor.’

She looked pained and bowed again. ‘Forgive me,’ she said, backing away into the shadows.

Antros stood there for a while, scowling as he watched her go. Then he shook his head and looked around, watching his servants working, relishing the sense of endless progress. Every word, every deed they copied into the Chapter’s records, pushed the boundaries of their understanding. He savoured the aroma of the place: ink and old paper, the smell of wisdom. The Librarium might seem, to an outsider at least, to be the quiet backwater of their fortress-monastery, but Antros felt the power of their work. Knowledge was their most potent weapon and all around him it was being honed by a legion of fearless, tireless minds.

Even Dimitra’s parting words could do nothing to dampen his mood. In the days since his meeting with Mephiston, he had quashed his fears and now felt a growing certainty that he was being groomed for some kind of advancement. This must be why questions were being asked about him. He had always felt that he was destined for a role of some significance and the more he thought about it, the more sure he was that Mephiston was about to recommend him for a senior position in one of the Chapter’s battle companies. He strode back through the scriptoria and began climbing the stairs that swept out in long, lazy arcs around the outside of the Orbicular Tower, orbiting its lichened spheres like a wind-lashed pennant. The Librarium Sagrestia was spread out beneath him, a shadowy mass of crypts, colonnades and reliquaries, scattered with so many pinpricks of

light that he felt like a god, looking down on the distant firmament. He knew the lights were just windows into the cells of scribes and rubricators, but from up here they looked like stars and, above them, shimmering like comets, mechanised braziers drifted by, lighting the routes from one section of the Librarium to another. Antros had spent almost his entire life beneath these distant barrel vaults, gazing on these firefly lights. He gripped the rail as he realised how close he was to fulfilling his dream. He could almost see the victories he would claim once Mephiston attached him to a battle company.

A sound broke his reverie and he looked up the steps towards his private chambers. His santuario was perched at the very top of the tower and uninvited guests were not welcome. But he was sure he had heard a door closing.

He pounded up the steps and found, to his outrage, that the door to the santuario was ajar.

Antros entered the central chamber, scouring it for signs of damage or theft. Nothing had been moved. Talismans and amulets covered his workbenches, in various states of repair, along with all the other esoteric devices he had inherited from the old master of the Orbicular Tower: bestial, alien skulls, archaic components of antique weapons, pale, foetal things preserved in glass weights, astrolabes, orreries and the myriad other tools of scrying and prophesising. This bewildering collection of arcana was propped up on and surrounded by heaps of books. Some were mildewed, leather-bound relics, while others were newly printed treatises, the ink still gleaming on their thick, unbound pages. A circular scrying glass covered most of one wall, its oily, black surface reflecting nothing, even when Antros passed before it, and the rest of the wall was draped in thick, richly decorated tapestries.

A first glance might have given the impression that such luxurious wall coverings were unbecoming for one of the Adeptus Astartes. On closer inspection, they were revealed to be purely functional. They were intricately embroidered with celestial maps and star charts, crowded with an impenetrable mass of astronomical and astrological information – galaxies and gods whirled around each other, dancing through the thick weave, picked out of the deep scarlet dye in glittering golden thread.

This cornucopia of the beautiful and the grotesque was lit by the warm

light of a gas lamp, hissing quietly in the corner of the room, suspended in the air on an ornate, brass, anti-grav platform. Antros knew that he should have found this wealth of relics exciting, but he could only think of it as his cage. He had spent his whole life striving for a chance to serve the God-Emperor in battle, to unleash all the fury that burned in his soul, and now that it seemed so close he was eager to be away.

He paused. Why was the lamp lit?

'Who's in here?' There was no need to call out. The santuario only consisted of a few small rooms.

'Forgive me,' said a voice from behind him. 'I did not mean to alarm you.'

The condescending tone was familiar and Antros knew it was Epistolary Rhacelus before he even turned to face him. The ancient Librarian was sitting in a gloomy corner, almost hidden apart from his strange blue eyes that glinted in the dark, reflecting the lamplight. He leant forwards and, as his face was revealed, Antros saw that his expression was particularly hostile. 'What happened on Thermia?' he asked.

Antros' anger had vanished at the site of his former instructor and this unexpected question disarmed him further. 'Epistolary,' he replied. 'The battle reports were all submitted to the Chapter archivists weeks ago.'

'And your personal report, neophyte? Has that been submitted?'

Antros had never heard Rhacelus speak with anything other than cool disdain, but now he sounded angry – almost venomous.

'I submitted my notes to Lord Mephiston,' he replied, refusing to be cowed.

'And what did you write? What happened between you and the Chief Librarian?'

Rhacelus rose to his feet and walked towards Antros, his expression growing darker as he came so close that his long, aquiline nose almost touched Antros'.

Antros shook his head. It went against all his years of training, but he would not discuss this with Rhacelus. The visions he had shared with Mephiston were not something he would describe out loud, even if he could. They were a secret he shared with the Chief Librarian. Then, with an almost physical jolt, it occurred to him that they might even be a secret from Mephiston. Perhaps Mephiston did not know exactly what had passed

through his own mind.

Rhacelus stared at him closely and Antros could feel the veteran's mind snaking around the edges of his thoughts.

Antros had learned enough to shield his mind from such casual inspection, but Rhacelus' look of disapproval grew even more pronounced. The old Librarian had seen that Antros was keeping secrets from him.

'Can I trust you?' asked Rhacelus.

'My lord,' replied Antros, angered by the slur. 'I am a sworn brother to–'

'Can I trust you?' growled Rhacelus, gripping Antros' forearm.

Rhacelus was armoured and Antros was not. He felt the Librarian's gauntlet crushing his bones.

'For reasons that are beyond me, the Chief Librarian means to entrust you with information. Information more dangerous than anything you saw on Thermia.' He tightened his grip. 'If you breathe a word of it to any living soul, I will know. I will *know*, Antros, and I will leave enough intelligence in your mind-wiped skull to torment you as you begin your new career as a septic tank.'

Antros' anger was dwarfed by his excitement. 'The Chief Librarian wishes to take me into his confidence?'

'I hear he has already done that,' said Rhacelus, his disapproval plain.

'My lord,' said Antros. 'You had faith in me as a neophyte. I do not know what has changed since then, but I swear to you, by the Golden Throne, that I would die rather than allow any harm to befall the Chief Librarian. All I have ever wished is to serve him and to prove his worth to any who might doubt him.'

Antros' passion filled his voice but he saw that Rhacelus was not convinced. The veteran loosed his grip but held his stare. 'For your sake, neophyte,' he said, 'I hope you are telling the truth.'

He waved to the door. 'Be quick. Dress yourself for battle.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Chemic Spheres, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Antros thought that this time he might have the chance to explore the Diurnal Vault in more detail, but Rhacelus did not give him time to pause. The Librarian had barely spoken as he led him from the Orbicular Tower, marching purposefully through the endless dusk of the Librarium to Mephiston's private chambers. After approaching the star-fuelled colossus at the centre of the vaults – the black-and-crimson statue of the Angel – Rhacelus had led Antros between its feet, down past rows of sentries and gun-servitors into a series of subterranean passageways. The damp, mossy crypts looked to be as old as the undercroft beneath the Carceri Arcanum and the architecture was of a similar style, but Antros had never seen this particular corner of the Librarium before. As Rhacelus led him deeper beneath the ground, the air grew oddly humid and water began to drip from Antros' battleplate, edging the greaves and vambraces with droplets that glinted in the torchlight.

As the chambers grew darker and warmer, Antros realised that they were alone. No sentries watched over the thick, rockcrete doors, but they were guarded in other ways. At each doorway Rhacelus mouthed a few silent words and drew in the air with his finger. As he did, a glowing rune appeared in the centre of the door and it slid open with a hiss of hydraulics.

They reached a stone door that was larger and more ornate than the previous ones. It looked to be even more ancient that the surrounding crypts. The images sculpted into the marble had been rendered indistinct by countless years of erosion. Only one aspect of its design had survived. At its centre were two characters: IX.

Standing on either side of the door was a black-robed figure. They were giants, as tall as Antros and Rhacelus, and it was clear from their hulking, inhuman frames that they were Adeptus Astartes. They wore no armour, but their hands were resting on the winged pommels of huge, two-handed swords, the blades of which were planted in the ground between their feet. Their heads were bowed but Antros caught a flash of metal in their deep hoods and realised they were wearing gold masks.

Rhacelus paid them no heed, placing his palm on the two numerals sculpted in the centre of the door. The door swung back with a groan of hinges and light flooded out to greet them. They walked on, past the sentries and, as he passed by, Antros had the odd sensation that their heads were swivelling, owl-like behind their gold masks, watching him as he passed. He looked back and saw that their heads had not moved, but he could not rid himself of the idea.

'The Chemic Spheres,' said Rhacelus, calling Antros' thoughts back to the blinding light ahead of them.

Before them was an ivory dome, caged by elegant, golden struts and buttresses. It burned with the power of the star trapped in the vaults above. There were rune-inscribed cables embedded in the girders, feeding Idalia's furious energy down into the dome's walls. The ivory surface was opaque, so he could see nothing within it and it shone so brightly that he could not see what surrounded it.

'What is this?' asked Antros, impressed by the majesty of the structure.

'A prison,' replied Rhacelus. 'A prison within prisons, strong enough to contain the Chapter's most dangerous weapon.' He looked hard at Antros. 'It takes the power of a sun to contain the soul incarcerated here.'

Antros felt another rush of excitement. How many other Lexicani had been here? He looked around at Rhacelus, but the old warrior ignored him, scratching his iron-grey beard thoughtfully as he studied the curved ivory wall before them. This close, Antros could see that the surface was not as featureless as it first appeared, but engraved with an intricate pattern of

tiny numbers.

Rhacelus unclipped a glass syringe from his armour. It was full of crimson liquid and as Rhacelus held it up into the sphere's light, Antros saw shapes suspended in it. He watched, fascinated, as Rhacelus pushed the needle into the wall of the sphere. The surface gave a little, as though it were flesh rather than ivory, and Rhacelus slowly injected the red liquid.

At first, nothing happened. Antros was just about to ask for an explanation when a web of thin red lines spread out from the needle tip. The crimson tracery crawled and trickled, like paint blown by a child. As the lines rippled over the ivory they formed a blood-red rectangle, several feet taller than the two Librarians.

'You remember what I said?' asked Rhacelus, glaring at Antros.

'Of course,' replied Antros, but he was only half listening – he was focusing all of his thoughts on the dazzling sphere, trying furiously to see a glimpse of what lay beyond the red door. His mind touched on something that made him recoil. He felt, rather than saw, a snapshot of horrific violence.

Rhacelus looked at him in surprise. 'You saw something.'

Antros shook his head. 'Just a feeling,' he muttered.

Rhacelus was clearly puzzled but said no more, returning his attention to the doorway. He muttered a string of words but Antros only caught two of them – it sounded like 'dark heir' or 'dark air'.

Then Rhacelus gave Antros a brief nod, withdrew the needle and stepped into the crimson portal, vanishing from view.

Antros followed, his hands raised before him, expecting to slam against the wall of the sphere. He did not, and found himself in near-total darkness. The only light came from Rhacelus' warp-tinted eyes as he turned to face Antros. 'Remember,' he said, before muttering another series of words and vanishing from view for a second time.

Antros stepped after him then halted, blinded by light and noise.

He crouched low, drawing his pistol. He and Rhacelus were standing on the ruins of a colossal Imperial building. Flames and smoke covered shattered parapets and the ground was shaking, as though the world were in the grip of a violent fever. There was a dull hammer blow of artillery impacts and the chemical sky was slashed into strange geometry by rocket trails and lines of tracer fire. Beyond the ruins there was a great mountain

of flame, rolling majestically across.

Rhacelus laughed. ‘No need for that,’ he said, nodding at Antros’ pistol. ‘We are neither here nor then.’ He clambered over the face of a decapitated statue and waved for Antros to follow.

Despite Rhacelus’ words, Antros could not help flinching as ordnance pounded and cracked all around him. A shell landed nearby, obliterating a grand archway and hurling debris in all directions. Antros held his hands before his face as a tank-sized piece of rubble flew towards him. The masonry passed straight through him and crashed down several feet away. He looked down at his battleplate and saw it was unmarked.

Intrigued, he tried pushing his foot through the rocks he was standing on and found that he could. His boot passed through the ground like water. He was an apparition.

‘The illusion mirrors real-world physics,’ explained Rhacelus as he continued climbing across the ruins. ‘It’s easier for your mind to cope with it this way. We could just as easily swim through these stones but our minds have an annoying fondness for the inconveniences of the materium, so they let us think we need to crawl and clamber through a “real” Hades Hive.’

‘Hades Hive?’ exclaimed Antros, looking up at the shattered spires that surrounded them. He suddenly recognised the ruins that were silhouetted against the war-torn sky. The wars for Armageddon were legendary for their brutality and Hades Hive in particular had great significance for the Blood Angels Chapter. ‘Why are we at Hades Hive?’ he cried, struggling to be heard over the explosions and clatter of collapsing walls.

‘Listen, neophyte,’ replied Rhacelus, as Antros hurried to catch up with him. ‘I told you we are not there or then; we are on Baal, beneath the Diurnal Vault, shouting like idiots into the silence of the Chemic Spheres.’

They crested a fallen buttress and found a bloodbath. Scattered in a crater below them were the corpses of dozens of xenos monsters – massive, brutish greenskins, clad in crudely wrought plates of armour and clutching a scrapyard of jerry-built weapons. Their low-slung heads had a boar-like bestiality, and their enormous jaws were crammed with tusks. If any of them had been alive, they would have made a terrifying sight. As it was, they were gutted and bleeding, gathering flies as their spilled viscera slowly baked in the sun.

Sitting on a toppled pillar, clutching one of the greenskins' hearts, was a peculiar sight. It was a Blood Angel dressed in the black of the Death Company. The ceremonial armour, daubed with a red X, clearly marked him out as one of those brave brothers who had lost his mind to the gene curse. The berserkers of the Death Company could only serve the Chapter by making their deaths as costly as possible. Sitting calmly on a rock was not possible for such damned souls – they raged, screamed and killed until they made their final sacrifice. Then Antros felt a flood of understanding as he saw the Blood Angel's face. It was Mephiston, but Mephiston as he must once have been – as physically perfect as any other Blood Angel. 'Calistarius,' muttered Antros. This was the moment of Mephiston's rebirth.

From his vantage point on the buttress, Antros could see dozens more greenskins loping through the ruins towards the spot where Calistarius was seated. He was about to call out, when Rhacelus placed a hand on his arm and shook his head. 'Remember your training, Lexicanium,' he said, nodding to the pouches at Antros' belt. 'Record and illuminate, brother, record and illuminate.'

Antros shook his head, confused. The whole situation was surreal, but he did as he was ordered, taking out his mnemonic stylus and tablet and beginning to take notes.

'You said this was a prison,' he said, whispering, even though he knew the greenskins could not hear him.

Rhacelus nodded. 'Mephiston created the Chemic Spheres to imprison our most dangerous weapon – himself. He needed a safe place to explore what he is.'

'What he is?' Antros was struggling to follow.

Rhacelus nodded at the approaching greenskins. 'Watch and record. Talk later.'

He tried not to react as the greenskins picked up their pace, smelling the presence of Calistarius. They swaggered across the rubble, hulking and ape-like as they belched out commands in the disgusting guttural language of their kind. The leader was a head taller than the others and clad in a full-body suit of rusting, jagged metal. Even its enormous head was hidden inside a grille-fronted helmet, hammered together from mismatched plates of armour. It looked more machine than ork, splintering slabs of rockcrete

under its square, metal boots as it smashed through walls and piles of razor wire. A flame gun was fixed to its left arm, dripping promethium, and the other arm ended in a giant, mechanised claw. At the sight of Calistarius it bellowed with pleasure, pointed its flamer at him and turned the crater into a lake of fire.

When the flames cleared, Calistarius was still seated, calmly studying the now blackened heart he was holding. He glanced up at the circle of greenskins that were forming around him but showed no sign of lifting the force sword that was lying across his lap.

The leader of the greenskins raised its metal claw and roared again, spraying blood and spit through the mesh of its helmet. The rest of the greenskins swept forwards, flooding the crater with their armour-clad bulk.

At the last possible moment, Calistarius stood and stepped to one side, swinging his sword as he moved and decapitating the first ork to reach him. The movement was so easy and fluid that it seemed more like dancing than fighting.

The now headless monster crashed into the wall of the crater, tearing away another hunk of granite.

The orks tried to correct their charge but several of them slammed into the spot that Calistarius had just vacated and the rest of them howled in frustration as they saw that he had moved again. Calistarius had bounded over a series of burned-out tank chassis and leapt at the orks' leader.

The monster tried to spin and face him, but its heavy armour made it slow and, before it could aim its weapon, Calistarius dropped from the sky and hammered his sword blade down through the grille of its helmet. As the blade struck home it erupted into crimson fire and the ork's head detonated in a plume of blood mist.

As the creature collapsed to the ground, Calistarius pulled his sparking sword free, placed his boot on the ork's corpse and used it as a springboard for another leap. As he passed over the heads of the mob below, they loosed a barrage of gunfire, but Calistarius merged with the ceiling of black fumes and vanished from sight, before reappearing back on the rock where he had started.

'There are too many,' hissed Antros, drawing Rhacelus' attention to the huge mobs of greenskins that were now rushing towards the crater, drawn

by the flames and gunfire.

'That's the point,' replied Rhacelus, nodding at Antros' stylus. 'Record and illuminate.'

Antros looked back to the crater and saw that Calistarius was now standing on the broken pillar, his sword raised and his plasma pistol drawn in readiness as the waves of orks charged.

Lines of blue plasma cut through the smoke, slamming into the heavily armoured orks and sending them sprawling onto their backs. Calistarius fired with preternatural speed, filling the crater with light and broken bodies. The orks crashed over the lip of the crater in ever greater numbers, crushing each other in their kill frenzy and, finally, Calistarius' pistol sparked and died, overheated by such a furious barrage of shots. He hurled it aside and stepped casually forwards to meet them with his blade, slashing, thrusting and parrying with such languid ease that he might have been back on Baal in a training cage.

By now the crater was heaped with greenskin dead and they were gradually forcing Calistarius back with their sheer numbers, grunting and roaring as they tried to bring him down.

Still showing no sign of alarm, Calistarius took a step back, grabbed his sword in both hands and stabbed the flaming blade down into the ground. Lines of fire splayed out beneath the orks' feet and, with a series of moist tearing sounds, their bodies began to burst open, exploding in a shower of boiling blood. The spitting, steaming liquid filled the air as row after row of the greenskins exploded inside their plate armour.

All the greenskins near to Calistarius collapsed in ruptured mounds, adding to the heaps of dead. Calistarius wrenched his force sword free and waded through the gore towards the survivors.

'Rhacelus,' hissed Antros, as he saw what Calistarius could not. As Mephiston prepared to finish off the rest of the orks, one of the fallen orks behind had risen from the corpses and aimed an odd-looking pistol at him.

Rhacelus shook his head, so Antros watched in impotent horror as the pistol flashed blue and fired.

Calistarius had already begun killing the rest of the orks, but he seemed to sense the shot before it was fired, dodging to one side. His foresight stopped the blow taking his head off but it still impacted with his shoulder with a fierce blue flash, hurling him through the air and slamming him

into the base of a toppled pillar.

He reached out towards the ork with his fingers splayed and the monster arched in pain, before collapsing into a sack of broken bones and pulverised flesh.

Another ork had taken advantage of the distraction to fire at Calistarius, this time with a big, two-handed rocket launcher. To fire a weapon like that at such short range was nothing short of suicidal. The crater vanished in a column of dust and whistling shrapnel.

When the dust cleared, Antros saw that Calistarius had been crushed into the masonry, like a toy pressed into wet clay. His black armour was glowing with embers and scorch marks and his force sword had been warped out of shape, the blade twisted into a useless mass of blunted metal.

Calistarius wrenched himself out of the rock and shook the dust from his face. The light show had drawn an even bigger crowd. Hundreds of greenskins were now gathering round the crater, grinning with their huge, tusk-crammed jaws and training a forest of guns on the dust-shrouded Space Marine below them.

Calistarius paused in shock, not at the numbers of greenskins, but at the sight of his ruined sword.

Antros gasped in pain as his head filled with an unbelievable rage. Rhacelus grabbed him before he fell, staring at him.

'What–?' he started to ask, but at that moment, a deafening howl tore through the air, drowning out even the sound of artillery and aircraft.

The ruins fell into shadow, as though something had passed in front of the sun and Antros looked down into the crater to see that the sound was coming from Calistarius. Just as he had seen on Thermia V, Calistarius had been transformed by an uncontrollable rage. He raised his hands towards the sky as though beseeching the clouds for aid, howling all the while.

All Antros could do was watch in awe as the heavens responded to Calistarius' summons. The wheeling, toxic clouds overhead formed into mountainous shards of grey rock and then dropped from the sky.

Antros shielded his face as the colossal spearheads slammed into the ruined city. They hit with a seismic impact, collapsing the few remaining towers and sending up new mountains of dust and fire. Antros climbed the wing of a broken statue and looked out over Hades Hive. Much of the view

was obscured by the plumes of dust and smoke, but in the gaps he saw that, in every direction, the rain of mountains was obliterating the ork clans. The blows were not discriminating between ork and human, though. He saw entire columns of Imperial armour vanish beneath the falling rocks and squadrons of Stormraven gunships smashed from the air.

As this atrocity grew in fury, Calistarius' roar grew louder. There was now a note of horror mixed in with the rage and, as Calistarius howled at the boiling sky, Antros felt alien thoughts blossoming in his mind. It was Calistarius' agony. *Now!* said a voice in his head. *Now!*

The noises inside Antros' head merged with the cacophony outside, until he could take no more. He joined his howl to Calistarius'.

Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the scene was gone. Antros stumbled, fell to the floor and saw that he was back in the Chemic Spheres. Nothing of the crypt beyond was visible – he was inside the ivory dome. Except it was no longer ivory. The intricate network of red lines had now crisscrossed the entire sphere and it was dripping constantly so that as Antros looked up, a fine, crimson rain washed over his face and he had to blink away the blood to see.

Opposite him was Mephiston. He was sitting in a tall, brass chair engraved with thousands of tiny cartouches. His face was haggard and cadaverous once more, and he was dressed in his usual crimson armour and robes. One of the syringes had been removed from his armour and it lay at his feet as he stared up at the ceiling of the sphere. The glass barrel was empty, Mephiston's eyes had rolled back in their sockets and he was slumped in the chair like a corpse. Antros thought the Chief Librarian might be dead. He was drenched in the blood that was falling over everything, slapping in thick droplets on the gleaming white floor.

'Chief Librarian!' cried Antros, climbing to his feet.

A hand on his shoulder halted him.

The veteran Librarian nodded to the other side of the sphere. As Antros looked, a second brass chair materialised from the air, covered in the same strange symbols as the first. As it formed from the aether, a complicated tracery of glyphs, lines and numbers spread across the floor, as though drawn in the blood by an invisible scribe – a crimson spiderweb, linking the two chairs.

Antros noticed that, as he walked, the crimson symbols on the floor

morphed and flowed around his footfalls, redrawing their shapes in response to his steps.

Rhacelus walked in the opposite direction and sat on a third brass chair that materialised to greet him. A complex network of red lines and ellipses now covered the floor, linking the three chairs as if they were celestial bodies in a star chart.

Antros and Rhacelus sat in silence, watching the slumped figure of their Chief Librarian. The only sound came from the blood rain, splashing crimson stars across the dazzling floor.

Antros was about to speak when a torrent of images flooded his mind. He saw Hades Hive again, but this time he was pinned beneath a huge weight, unable to move, despite an incredible fury pounding through his veins. It was agony, but Antros sensed that he was now seeing the truth.

+It is always the same and always different,+ said Mephiston in his head. Antros looked over at the Chief Librarian, but he was still insensate. +Always, Armageddon. But each time I try to discover the meaning of my power, changing the details, searching for the truth of my birth – the truth of my nature.+

'I do not understand,' said Antros.

+Yes, you do, Lexicanium. We have nobility in our blood. Such nobility. The blood of the Angel. Divinity. Filling our hearts. Swelling our veins. Our father was the Emperor's purest son and we carry his bloodline still. I know you feel it, Lexicanium – the faith and the fury, the honour and the hunger, burning within you, as it does in all of the Angel's sons.+

The dome's walls parted to reveal a wall of blood-filled eyes, dozens of them, all staring at him. +Apart from me, of course. I have escaped the curse. The tales are true. However furious the fight, the usual hunger does not haunt me – my heart no longer pounds with those terrible lusts. I have escaped the doom of our Chapter. I am unfettered, free to finally prove our nobility. I have the power to avert the grim fate that hangs over us – this slow, gnawing decline, this gradual death.+

The eyes closed and the walls became a featureless white once more. As the grotesque images vanished, the scenes of destruction filled Antros' mind again, showing him the ruins of Hades Hive.

+And yet I return here, faithful as the tide, endlessly rewriting the moment of my death-birth. You see, I have escaped one curse only to

discover another, far crueller torment. What you saw on Thermia is an echo of that first slaughter on Hades Hive. But instead of fading, the echo grows louder with every repeat. Every time I give vent to my power, it becomes wilder, more dangerous, more unstoppable. At first I can use it as a weapon, but the weapon becomes the wielder and, when I am myself again, I recall nothing of the excesses it has driven me to. All I know is the carnage I have wrought.+

There was a clatter of ceramite as Mephiston sat up in his chair. His face was freckled with blood spots and his hair was plastered across his clammy skin. 'But I *have* to control it, Lexicanium,' he said, speaking out loud. 'If I can find an anchor for the power that is growing in me, I will be the living embodiment of what a Blood Angel can be. I will be proof that we can finally escape this curse. Do you understand? If I can master this gift, I can save us. There is no power in the warp equal to the strength that has been given to me. It is like none of the disciplines we strive to master through learning. It is not practised. It is not studied. It is wild, *glorious*. It is the blood of Sanguinius unbound. It is the power of a…' His words faltered and he looked at the blood-splattered floor. 'I am so close to fulfilling the destiny that the Angel was robbed of, but if I cannot harness this… If I cannot control this power, if it keeps growing in fury and I find no leash…' He shook his head and his voice was full of pain. 'Then it would be better that I died as Calistarius under those rocks. Rather than save us, I will be the final death knell for the sons of the Angel.'

Mephiston fell silent and after a while Rhacelus spoke up. He saw the surprise in Antros' face and his usual, sardonic tone was absent. 'For decades I have watched over the Chief Librarian in this hidden chamber. Witnessing his agony as he pushes himself again and again to the edge of destruction, attempting to divine the key to this gift.' He rose from his chair and crossed the room, covering the floor with a new explosion of bloody sigils. 'But we have failed, every time.'

As Rhacelus reached the wall of the sphere, a brass plinth, as high as his waist, materialised from the dazzling whiteness. On top of the elegant, beautifully filigreed plinth was a book: a thick, leather-bound ledger, locked shut with a metal clasp. Its cover bore no title, but it was embossed with a winged blood drop, picked out in gold leaf. Next to the book was a quill and inkstand.

‘I record everything,’ said Rhacelus. ‘Every word and deed that drives the Chief Librarian to the brink and at the moment I feel him straining at the bonds of sanity…’ He nodded to the bloody syringe lying on the floor. ‘I bring him back.’

‘Then you *do* have control,’ said Antros, looking at the empty syringe.

Mephiston shook his head. ‘Each time it is harder to hear Gaius’ call.’ He leant forwards in his chair, his eyes shifting colour to match the sapphire gleam in Rhacelus’ eyes. ‘If I gave vent to all the power I have within me, there is *nothing* that could bring me back. So I chain myself like a dog. Always, holding myself back.’ He began pacing around the chamber. ‘But this power comes from the Angel! To deny it is impossible. And wrong. I must find a way to unleash his full might. I have held it at bay so long that it is starting to devour me from within.’

He stopped and faced Antros, his eyes burning, his mask of serenity forgotten. ‘Why would the Angel show me so great a destiny but deny me the means to embrace it? What is this trial he has set me? Ultimate power, within my grasp.’ He clawed at the air, causing it to ripple and boil. ‘And I cannot use it.’

He stopped pacing and stared into the middle distance, his eyes full of hope. ‘But now I see a chance. I have heard the same summons that haunts Zin. Someone is calling me to Divinus Prime. Something is waiting for me there. Something that will give me the answer. Something Zin thinks I am blind to. But until now I could not give it a name.’

Mephiston drew Vitarus and dragged the tip of its blade across the floor, causing a new explosion of crimson ciphers.

Antros leant forwards as a shape started to form from the bloody symbols. He noticed that Rhacelus was watching just as eagerly and realised that whatever Mephiston was about to reveal was news to his equerry.

‘Today, Lexicanium, you found the name that has eluded me.’ He stared at Antros. ‘All these years I have searched afar for something that was so close. And now you walk into my own chambers with the name of my salvation on your lips.’

Antros shook his head, mystified. ‘I have found no more information about the Children of the Vow.’

Rhacelus stared at the image emerging beneath Mephiston’s sword. As he

recognised the shape, his face went slack.

The blood had drawn a picture of an awkward-looking sword hilt. Antros shook his head, mystified by Rhacelus' awed expression. The thing looked not only ugly but also useless. The handle was an odd, triangular shape that would be almost impossible to hold. It was like a child's idea of a sword handle.

'The Blade Petrific,' muttered Rhacelus, dropping to his knees in the blood and reaching out so his hand hovered just a few inches above the image.

Mephiston nodded, his hand trembling slightly on Vitarus' hilt. 'It is there, Rhacelus. I hoped against hope when Antros drew my attention to Zin's use of the word "vow" but I was not sure until he walked in here with that name rattling around his skull, unprompted by me. The Blade Petrific is *on* Divinus Prime, Gaius. Those halfwit priests have no inkling of what they are fighting over. They have been praying to it, in secret, since before the dawn of the Imperium, in complete ignorance of its true importance. They think it is a holy relic and nothing more. It is because of the Blade Petrific that Zin is so desperate to retrieve this world in particular. The Children of the Vow have built their whole faith around the blade. They wish to keep it secret and hidden above all else.'

'A sword?' asked Antros, recognising the shape of the hilt from the illuminated letters Scholiast Ghor had shown him. 'My lord, I do not understand. You're helping Zin reach this damned world because of a sword? Surely there are weapons in our own vaults more worthy of you?'

Mephiston lifted Vitarus off the floor and the image vanished, returning the blood to a formless spiral of numbers and lines.

'The Blade Petrific is no sword,' he said. 'The shape is merely a coincidence. It is a machine – a device created in the Dark Age of Technology, a neural conduit. It predates even the forming of the Legions, Lexicanium. Who knows what the thing is really called, but it was born in a time of far greater understanding than ours.' Mephiston paced back and forth, disrupting the blood map that covered the floor. 'It is a way to control and harness even the greatest phyrric waves,' he explained, 'a psychic lens worthy of a god.'

Rhacelus looked dazed by the implications. 'You could fully unleash the Gift. You could let your mind soar.'

Antros started to understand how significant this piece of archeotech was. He thought back to the scene he had witnessed on Thermia and considered what could have been if Mephiston's wrath had continued to grow, unabated: a psychic storm, primarch-like in its magnificence. As he considered this, a shocking image flashed through Antros' mind. He saw the Chief Librarian bathed in blood as thousands of Ecclesiarchy priests lay around him in mounds, butchered and bleeding. But it was not the corpses that shocked him; it was the things that were moving through them – protean, mercurial creatures, forming and reforming as they gambolled and slid through the gore. They were lunatic things from the darkest recesses of a nightmare – warp-fiends, giggling and shrieking as they devoured the souls of the dead.

Antros sat back down heavily in his chair and Mephiston halted to stare at him.

Antros dared not meet the Chief Librarian's eye. The vision had filled him with an unspeakable doubt, a thought that no servant of the Librarius should ever entertain. What if the power Mephiston sought to harness did *not* come from Sanguinius? What if it came from another, darker source? He thought of the black flames he had seen rippling across Mephiston's arm.

Mephiston remained silent, staring at Antros as the rain of blood continued pattering against his armour.

'My lord,' asked Antros. 'Why have you brought me here?'

It took a while for Mephiston to answer and when he did his voice sounded strained, as though he were struggling to maintain his usual, calm demeanour. 'Because I feel you in my mind, Lexicanium. I do not understand why, but I sense that you know things about me that I do not even know myself. One way or another, my trials are nearing their end. Either I control this power or it will destroy me. I am *so* close to losing my mind. My sanity is besieged by shadows. What happened on Thermia shocked me, Lexicanium.' His voice faltered. 'You know what was in my mind when I turned on you.'

Antros felt a wave of nausea as he realised that the Chief Librarian *had* been about to kill him.

Mephiston took a deep breath and looked at his left hand. It was trembling slightly, like the hand of a drunk. He did not look at Antros as he

said, ‘Either you have come to save me, Lexicanium, or to save everyone else *from* me. And on Divinus Prime I will find out which.’

CHAPTER NINE

Kobella, Divinus Prime

Captain Hesbon grinned as a tide of hands held him aloft. As he rose over the heads of the crowd, he felt as though their cheers were carrying him. The victory songs were almost loud enough to drown out the screams of the wounded. Around him, cowed and broken, kneeled the great bastion of Kobella. The final obstacle between the Enlightened and Volgatis had been conquered, its ancient gates torn down and its guns silenced. His dragoons had fought for twelve days, sustaining their worst losses since the start of the crusade, but the sight of those broken gates made it all worthwhile. Beyond them, outside the city, the Great East Road was lined with thousands of soldiers, its ancient flagstones hidden by a river of golden cuirasses and smiling, exhausted faces. As one, the Enlightened roared their refrain: For the Emperor!

Those that could get near enough snatched at Hesbon's robes, hoping to catch a piece of divinity in their captain's threadbare cloth. After four decades of devotion, Hesbon had finally caught the attention of his god. No, he thought, trying to crush his pride, they had *all* caught the attention of the God-Emperor. 'I may have given the order,' he cried, trying to show some humility, 'but it was your courage that smashed the gates!' However hard he tried though, he could not suppress his proud grin. As the victorious army passed Hesbon over their heads, crying out his name, he

started to laugh.

The Enlightened poured into Kobella; they trampled over the corpses of its defenders. Their former brothers lay in smouldering heaps, torn apart by the guns of the dragoons. The flails and chainswords of the Frateris Militia were scattered across the ground, lying next to the corpses of their previous owners. With the battle over, and the threat gone, the dead militiamen made a pathetic sight. Hesbon felt a flash of pity, but he quickly crushed it. The militia had been offered the same truths as the rest of Divinus Prime and they had refused to see the Emperor's light. It was a tragic end but he hoped that in death they might have seen the truth of their heresy and found forgiveness.

As the dragoons filed into the great square, Hesbon bellowed orders, sending men clambering over the shattered statues and temples to take up positions in the rubble, training their guns on the avenues that led deeper into Kobella's heart. The gates may have fallen but there was still hard, bloody work ahead of them. Hesbon lay back on his bed of hands and savoured the moment. The sky was draped with low, fast-moving clouds and Hesbon, to his shame, found this a relief. Unlike the dead militiamen, he never doubted the sanctity of the Miracle, the incredible transformation of the heavens, but he had also never got used to looking at it.

As they crossed the square Hesbon heard cruel laughter mingled with the cheers and battle-cries. A few moments later, he saw the source. One of the heretics was still alive, trapped at the edge of the square as Hesbon's dragoons surrounded her. She was cowering in the wreckage of a gun emplacement. It had toppled from the walls during the battle and now lay like a slain beast in the centre of the mob. There was a crater full of burned-out tanks behind the emplacement and the heretic had clearly been taking shelter in the jagged shards of metal. She was screaming and howling in fear as the Enlightened hurled lit brands at her, and some of the surrounded ruins were already catching. It would not be long before she was engulfed in flames.

Hesbon's grin faded as he realised that the heretic was only a girl, fifteen years old at most and completely unarmed.

'Wait!' he cried. 'We're not animals!'

The noise of the crowd drowned him out, so he climbed to his feet and stood, swaying precariously on the heads and hands of those carrying him.

‘Stop!’ he roared.

A wave of surprised silenced passed through the crowd and the victorious soldiers turned to face Hesbon.

His nerve almost failed as he saw the suspicion and anger in the faces of his men. They were like hounds, hauled back from the kill. His doubt was fleeting. He considered what the Unbegotten Prince would do in the face of such barbarism. With a rush of renewed outrage, he cried out again. ‘Brothers! This is not worthy of us. It is not worthy of the Emperor. Do not lower yourselves to the level of these misguided souls. They are stumbling in the shadows of misbelief, but we are not. We are Enlightened. Think of all that we have been taught.’

‘These people are damned!’ roared a nearby dragoon. He pointed his lasrifle at the sky. ‘They denied the Miracle!’

‘They denied the prince!’ yelled another.

‘Would you let her rejoin her brothers?’ cried another. ‘And give her another go at killing us?’

The crowd roared in agreement, hammering guns against breastplates and hurling rubble at the girl.

Captain Hesbon cried out another order to stop but it was impossible to be heard over the din of the mob. Anger filled his mind. ‘Are we no better than the fools we’ve slain?’ he cried, but they did not hear. The crowd were still holding him aloft, but the grips were harder now, more aggressive.

He looked around the crowd and saw that some of his men had fallen back, their faces full of shame, but others had started to push towards him through the press of bodies, outraged, savage curses on their lips and guns raised. They were still full of bloodlust after a battle that had been hard won. Captain Hesbon struggled to free himself but, as the crowd grew more frenzied, the hands gripping him locked even tighter, presenting him to the approaching soldiers like an offering.

‘Damn you!’ he yelled, trying to draw his sword, but finding that he could not. ‘I will have you shot for this!’

Light flooded the square.

The blaze was so bright that it momentarily blinded anyone facing the shattered city gates. Hesbon thought at first that the clouds must have rolled back to let in some sunlight, but as he looked back he saw the truth.

The crowd fell quiet as a dazzling, spectral entourage rode through the gates. It was a divine host, sculpted from sunlight: patrician lions, sagacious dragons and hundreds of soaring eagles. All there and yet not there. None of them cast shadows and the landscape beyond was visible through their incandescent flesh. Above the host were dozens of haloed saints, their wings spread and their swords raised to the heavens. Yet, as magnificent as these creatures were, every eye in the courtyard was fixed on the figure riding before them. The Unbegotten Prince was on a huge, winding serpent – a truly monstrous creature, unlike anything Hesbon had seen before. It was fifty feet long, sported vast, glittering wings and had the head of an enormous eagle. But Hesbon's eyes skipped over the winged snake and fixed on its rider. The Unbegotten Prince was dressed in gleaming white-and-gold battleplate. The layered ceramite was filigreed and engraved with such intricate designs that it glittered as he raised his sword to the clouds. His helmet was at his belt and his waist-length black hair was free to tumble across his power armour, in sharp contrast to his gleaming white cuirass. The prince's face was lit from beneath by cold blue light, shining from a fist-sized sapphire embedded in the centre of his chest armour. He was a holy vision, shimmering in the heat haze – a star, fallen from the heavens and given human form. The Emperor's prophet burned bright, aflame with divine wisdom.

Faced with this dazzling avatar of their glorious prophet, the regiments of dragoons dropped to their knees, prostrating themselves. It was as though the Emperor Himself were riding towards them on the back of a mythical beast. As the prophet approached, the light dimmed and the spectral shapes melted away, leaving just the prince on his winged steed. Even when the light had stopped blazing from his skin, he looked utterly divine.

The prince pointed the tip of his sword from head to head until finally Hesbon realised, to his amazement, that it was pointed at him.

'What *would* you have us do with unbelievers, Captain Hesbon?' The prince's clear, musical voice rang out through the ruins. 'Stand, brother, and share your thoughts.'

The city fell silent as Hesbon climbed, with some difficulty, to his feet. He looked around and saw the surreal sight of his entire army on its knees. A few of his braver men dared to look up, but most kept their heads pressed to the ground.

The Unbegotten Prince approached, the enormous mass of the serpent crushing rubble like leaves.

Hesbon felt even more terrified than when he had faced the mob. ‘My lord,’ he said. ‘If I have offended you in any way, I never meant to–’

‘Blasphemers!’ cried a voice from the ruins and a series of rockets screamed through the air, tearing chunks from the masonry near the prince, shrouding his serpent steed in dust.

Hesbon drew his laspistol and looked back, cursing his hubris. The square was clearly not secure. With a series of furious hand gestures he ordered the Enlightened into action. They leapt to their feet with a clatter of boots and armour. Some formed a protective circle around the prince while others raised their lasweapons and took up defensive positions in doorways and windows, scouring the streets for signs of the gunman.

When the dust cleared, Hesbon saw that the Unbegotten Prince had not moved. He was still sitting calmly and smiling. Then he raised his sword to the black-bellied clouds and whispered a prayer.

An electric charge rippled through the air and a breeze whipped up from nowhere, creating eddies and whorls in the dust. Captain Hesbon gasped as he felt the prince’s divine presence moving through the city. He saw the same wonder in the faces of the guards crouched next to him.

‘The Emperor is with us,’ he whispered, tears forming in his eyes.

The storm around the prince grew more powerful as he continued to pray, and a tornado started to form around him, whipping up the clouds overhead.

Finally, the force grew so powerful that the clouds rolled back, pouring daylight down into the square and revealing the dreadful vision that had triggered the schism on Divinus Prime.

Hesbon’s tears ran freely as he forced himself to look directly at the Miracle. The clouds vanished, torn open by the prince’s storm, and where they should have revealed the clear blue of a midday sky, Hesbon saw the world looking back at him. As on every other day since the civil war began, the sky was a mirror, an exact likeness of the world below. Hesbon even fancied that he could see himself, hunkered down next to a tank, miles up in the sky.

‘For the Emperor!’ cried Hesbon, his voice hoarse with emotion.

The prince was not finished. As daylight flooded the scene, it revealed

another strange sight: a group of militiamen, floating up from a ruined temple on the far side of the square, kicking and writhing as their weapons clattered onto the flagstones below.

The prince raised his free hand into the whirlwind and a shaft of holy light engulfed him. The sapphire in his chestplate blazed, throwing a dazzling blue nimbus around his open hand. Then he clenched his fist and hurled the ball of light into the sky. It shot like a thunderbolt towards the mirror city overhead and, as it flew, it dragged the floating men with it, propelling them higher.

As they soared higher, their mirror twins rushed down to meet them. The two sets of men passed through each other before simultaneously slamming to the ground.

They hit with such force that Hesbon could not help but wretch. He was standing just twenty feet from where the men exploded across the flagstones.

The prince lowered his hand and the light vanished. The clouds tumbled back into place, masking the mirror city and plunging the square into gloom.

Everyone stared at the prince, aware that they had seen a second miracle. The prince calmly rode to Captain Hesbon and waved at the child, still cowering under the gun emplacement. ‘What would you have us do with her?’ he asked, as though nothing had happened, gracing the captain with a beatific smile.

‘Prince… My Lord,’ stammered Hesbon. ‘I never meant to deny the holiness of your work – or your great vision.’ He glanced again at the weeping child and, despite his fear of the prince and his shame at challenging such a divine being, he found himself shaking his head. ‘But it cannot be right to kill her.’ He looked into the prince’s blazing eyes. ‘Look at her, my lord. She’s no heretic – just a poor wretch trying to stay alive. Surely we should not lower ourselves to the cruelty of our enemies?’

The whole fortress fell silent, shocked at this outburst, and the prince stared down at Hesbon from the back of his enormous steed. Then the snake looped closer and the prince lifted a finger to one of his eyes, catching a single, diamond-like tear. ‘There are many kinds of victory,’ he said, his voice ringing out through the fumes. He waved his sword at the ruins and corpses that surrounded them. ‘Victories of the flesh are to be

celebrated, of course.' He reached down and placed the glittering tear on Hesbon's forehead. 'But victories of the soul are far more precious.'

Light exploded in Hesbon's mind. He staggered and fell, blinded for a moment as the light grew brighter. He could no longer see the prince but he could still hear him addressing the crowd.

'I came to you with a vision, my brothers. A vision of enlightenment through change. For too long we have been smothered by doctrine and dogma. Now begin anew. Now learn to *think* again. Now we decide what is right and we act. No more sitting in quiet prayer. No more waiting for the Imperium to die. The time for action has come!'

A deafening roar rang out.

'We will seize the Emperor's blade and we will take it to Terra! We will lay it at His very feet!'

Another deafening roar.

'But,' said the prince, lowering his voice a little. 'If we are to serve a god, we must *think* like a god. We must no longer be blinded by superstition or hate. We must cast blind zealotry aside. We must be as clear-sighted as the Lord of the Luminous Throne.' He paused and Hesbon's vision had returned enough to see that the prince was smiling at him. 'We must be as clear-sighted as Captain Hesbon,' said the prince, signalling for Hesbon to rise.

As Captain Hesbon climbed to his feet he felt an odd sensation – a weight on his shoulders that had not been there before.

The ranks of dragoons stared at him in awe and backed away, muttering prayers and making the sign of the aquila.

'Do not be afraid, brothers,' laughed the prince. 'A portion of the Emperor's soul has alighted on your captain. Such blessings only confirm the holiness of our mission.'

To Captain Hesbon's amazement, some of the soldiers nearest to him dropped to their knees, as though he were a holy relic.

He backed away, confused, and caught his heel on a piece of the ruins. Before he fell, he pounded his broad, powerful wings, creating a cloud of dust as he steadied himself. Wings? Hesbon strained to look over his shoulder and saw a vivid splash of colour in his peripheral vision – vibrant blue and pink feathers, ruffled by the breeze. With a wonderfully pleasant stretching sensation, he extended the wings to their full span – dozens of

feet on either side of him. He laughed as a tremendous vigour rushed through him.

'*Commander* Hesbon,' said the prince, still beaming. 'You have proved yourself a true leader of men. The bloodlust of an entire army was not enough to cloud your judgement. The time has come for our final march.' The prince kept his voice loud enough that all the soldiers in the courtyard could hear him. 'After what they have seen today, your men will give you the unquestioning loyalty you deserve.' He looked out at the crowd and roared, 'Am I right?'

The army howled in reply, hammering their guns against their chest armour. The combination of their victory and the transformation of their captain left the dragoons almost drunk with emotion. The sound of their cries was deafening and both the prince and his new commander laughed in delight.

'We make for Volgatis with all the speed we can muster,' said the prince when the noise had finally died down. 'The sons of Sanguinius are coming to Divinus Prime and they mean to claim the blade for their own. They intend to steal it away and bury it in the forgotten crypts of Baal. Just like these heretics you have fought so valiantly to defeat, the Blood Angels would hide the blade from the Emperor. We will not allow that to happen. We will be quick. We will go to Volgatis, tear down those idolatrous gates and take the Emperor's prize. And know this – when victory is ours, every voice on Terra will sing your names!'

The soldiers roared again, raising their lasrifles to the sky as the prince blazed with light once more. Then he turned and led the way out of the gates, ranks of dragoons rushing after him. Even with the sun directly overhead, the courtyard seemed to plunge into darkness as the prince left, taking his sublime radiance with him.

Hesbon felt a momentary panic, wondering if he had hallucinated the entire episode. Then he looked around the courtyard and saw that the troops nearby were all still staring at him with the same stupefied expressions. He flexed his shoulder blades and, to his delight, the vibrant wings were still there. Where they had torn through his armour, some of his skin had been exposed and Hesbon saw that a swirl of baroque symbols and characters had appeared where the wings joined his back. He could not read the symbols but the designs were so beautiful that they could only be

divine in origin.

The soldiers looked at Hesbon in expectation. He could not understand what they wanted of him; then he realised and pounded the wings with all the force he could muster. He soared up from the ground, passing the broken faces of toppled statues and the tops of ruined battlements. He felt the air rushing through his feathers as he flew higher and an incredible euphoria washed over him. He revelled in the sensation of flight, looping and rolling through the air as the army below stared up at him in silent wonder. For a while he forgot everything but the physical joy of weightlessness. Then he recalled the prince's warning that the Adeptus Astartes were also racing to Volgatis. He glided back down through the clouds and landed, a little awkwardly, back in the courtyard.

His men roared their approval and rushed towards him with delighted faces.

'This is no time to celebrate!' cried Hesbon, trying to hide his own excitement as he felt his wings beating slowly behind him. 'The Unbegotten Prince has spoken. Follow him to victory! We march for Volgatis!'

Half of the prince's army was already back on the road, and Hesbon ordered the remaining men into ranks and waved them towards the gates. It was only as the last of the columns marched past him, and he prepared to join his lord at the head of the army, that he recalled the girl who had been the cause of the prince's speech.

He looked back at the wrecked gun emplacement and saw that the bedraggled, malnourished youth was still there. The fear was gone from her face, replaced by a look of astonishment.

Hesbon gave her a slight bow, feeling utterly magnanimous after everything that had occurred. 'Head south, child,' he said. 'Make for the Esomino coast. War will not find you there.'

She nodded, gratitude in her eyes.

'Good luck to you,' said Hesbon. Then he pounded his wings and launched himself into the air, gliding across the serried ranks of his glory-bound army.

The girl stood watching him for a while, her filthy, emaciated body shivering with exhaustion. Then she sat down heavily on the twisted barrel of the gun. It was only once the army was far in the distance that she began

to laugh.

'By the Throne,' she gasped, struggling to speak as her laughter grew more violent. 'How did you know that would work? How were you so *right?*'

A group of figures climbed slowly from the wreckage behind her, all equally blood splattered and filthy. They wore a mismatched collection of robes and battle fatigues that marked them out as members of Divinus Prime's militia and they carried an eclectic mix of weapons: flamers, crudely customised lasrifles and brutal-looking flails, all still dripping with the blood of the Enlightened. Dozens of them clambered up to surround the laughing girl and most of them were heavy-set men, with scarred, tattooed muscle and draped in holy icons. The leader of the group, however, was a woman. Her hair was shaved and her skin was tattooed with holy screeds. She wore the same filthy fatigues and she carried a lethal-looking laspistol, but her demeanour was strikingly different from the men. While their faces were contorted by fanaticism and rage, hers was marked by a mischievous, crooked smile.

'I knew it would work,' she said, giving the girl a fierce hug, 'because they are morons, and I am not.' She sat down and picked a bit of food out of her teeth. As she held it up into the light, examining it thoughtfully, she said, 'What you have to remember, Dharmia, is that in the kingdom of the moron, the not-a-moron is king.'

Dharmia laughed harder, smearing the grime from her sunburned face as she wiped away tears of delight. 'And what do you intend to do next, oh mighty not-a-moron?'

One of the militiamen, a wild-eyed zealot clutching a chainsword, shoved his way through the others. He was a low-browed brute with a face like a slab of granite. 'Did you hear what he said, Livia?' The man's voice was low and coarse. '*Blood Angels*. Coming here. And they want the blade. We knew that the apostates meant to steal it, but now it's the Adeptus Astartes as well.'

Livia turned her playful smile on him. 'The prince said more than that, Abderos. Were you listening?'

The man licked his lips and flushed purple with anger. 'I did not catch every stinking–'

'Volgatis,' said Dharmia, grinning.

Livia winked at the girl. ‘He said *Volgatis*. And why would the prince lead his apostates to Volgatis?’

‘Because the blade is there!’ cried Dharmia.

‘Because the blade is there.’ Livia placed a kiss on her forehead, smearing the blood and filth. ‘I have no parrot wings to give you, Dharmia, but consider yourself my new general.’

Dharmia laughed again, snatched a broken sword from a dead dragoon, and began leaping from corpse to corpse, swinging the blade at imaginary foes.

Livia climbed up on top of the broken gun, surveying the growing numbers of militiamen gathering around her.

‘The sparkly apostate may call himself a prince and he is, indeed, very pretty. He may have Hesbon’s dragoons at his back and the ability to look shiny while others do his dirty work, but getting that bloated army up to Volgatis will be a hard, slow battle. Think about Volgatis’ position. They will be half-frozen by the time they get to the top of that mountain and they will be under fire before the dragoons can get within a mile of the gates.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘But we will be welcomed with open arms.’

Abderos scowled at her, trying to mask fear with anger. ‘And if we manage to get the blade, we will have the Angels of Death after us.’ He lifted up his chainsword. ‘What use would our weapons be against Adeptus Astartes?’

Livia shrugged. ‘You may be right. Perhaps we should all just go home, Abderos. There could be some danger involved. Besides, if the Blood Angels take the Blade Petrific, they will probably put it to good use in some battle or other before they lose it or break it.’ She tapped her head. ‘Think, Abderos! They are Adeptus Astartes. They are Angels of Death. They will not be interested in our vow to preserve the Emperor’s blade. They will not understand the need to preserve its sanctity, to keep it here on Divinus Prime. They will take it to war.’ She suddenly looked serious. ‘You swore a vow to protect the Blade Petrific until the Emperor returns, Abderos.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘Didn’t you?’

Abderos twisted his head to one side, grinding the muscles in his neck. ‘I have not forgotten my oath, Livia,’ he growled, jabbing his bloodstained chainsword at her face. ‘But how safe will the blade be if we remove it from Volgatis? That convent was designed to protect the Blade Petrific.

The Seraphim have watched over it for centuries. How safe will it be when we're wandering through the Tamarus Mountains with Blood Angels at our backs?'

'Volgatis is doomed,' said Livia, smiling kindly, as though addressing a confused child. 'The prince is leading his army of apostates there as we speak. They will struggle up those mountain passes but Volgatis *will* fall. Half the planet has embraced his lies. And the other half are cowering in Mormotha, waiting for the arch-cardinal to pray his head out of his arse. And it now sounds like Blood Angels might steal the blade even before the apostates do.'

The smile slipped from her face as she looked around the faces of her followers. 'We are the Emperor's last hope. Think about it. We are the only Children of the Vow who have the intention and the *chance* of fulfilling our promise. The Seraphim think Volgatis is impregnable. They think they are beyond the reach of mortal men. And they will still be thinking that when the apostates are leaving for Terra with the Blade Petrific in their back pocket. You heard the prince. He means to take it from Divinus Prime. It is down to *us* to save the blade. If we don't, no one will. You know it's true.'

Livia shrugged again. 'But I can understand your fear, Abderos. There is some danger involved.' She turned to the young girl. 'Dharmia, what about you? Perhaps you would like to head home too?'

Dharmia stopped leaping across the ruins and replied in nonchalant tones. 'The Vow *is* my home.' She looked up at the sky. 'If I fail the Emperor, what else do I have?'

Abderos stared at the girl. Then he lowered his chainsword and nodded with a humbled expression.

Livia gave him one of her crooked smiles. 'These Blood Angels… How tough can they really be?'

Abderos scowled furiously but, as his brothers stared at him with a mixture of amusement and hope, his grim expression started to falter.

'Damn you all!' he snapped, grinning as they burst into guffaws of laughter.

Dharmia dashed across the rubble and pretended to lunge at Abderos with her broken sword.

Livia grinned and nodded to the gates. 'To Volgatis, my brave not-a-

morons. I always find it's preferable to arrive *before* the shooting starts.'

CHAPTER TEN

Librarium Sagrestia, Arx Angelicum, Baal

Confessor Zin entered the Ostensorio with the swagger of a triumphant king. He was flanked by a column of priests and subordinates, all wearing white lead on their faces and cradling a dazzling collection of holy relics. The priests in the front lines waved glinting censers, shrouding those behind in scented fumes, and by the time Zin emerged there was so much smoke that he seemed to be levitating up from the underworld. He was carried on an enormous sedan chair that was gilded and polished to such a sheen it blazed, flashing in the light of the myriad candles lining the procession. Above his head teetered a dazzling panoply of banners and standards, all portraying the same angelic, sword-wielding figure. Some of the priests struggled beneath the weight of naked flagellants mounted on long, wooden stakes, their emaciated limbs nailed to the coarse bark, decorating the white faces of those below with bright, blooming flowers of blood. As they bled, the flagellants rang bells and clanged cymbals, creating a dreadful, clattering din.

Gathered ahead of this gaudy procession, in the centre of the devastated hall, was a far more sombre group. Mephiston was waiting patiently before the brass monstrance, as cool and inert as the shattered busts beneath his feet. He looked immaculate, his intricately wrought battleplate polished to a dull sheen and his hands resting on the hilt of Vitarus, whose

blade was dark and indolent, sensing no chance of bloodshed. Mephiston was flanked on one side by his equerry, the proud Epistolary Rhacelus, and on the other side by the eager-looking Lexicanium Antros. Behind the three Librarians were two squads of Blood Angels – battle-brothers of the Fourth Company, assembled in perfect, motionless formation behind Captain Vatrenus. Behind the Tactical Marines there was a Techmarine, his armour so laden with augmetics and the arcane machinery of the Adeptus Mechanicus that he looked like a mechanised beetle, looming in the shadows. His helmet was almost entirely obscured by measuring instruments and the rest of his armour was cluttered with massive servo-claws and drill bits as thick as a mortal man's waist. Finally, there was a Sanguinary Priest, armed with an ornate chainsword and the sinister-looking medical instruments that marked him out as the keeper of his Chapter's gene-seed.

All of the Space Marines were dressed for war, wearing full battleplate and cradling a fearsome array of weaponry. There was also a mortal in their number: Prester Kohath, whose emaciated, unconscious body was fastened to the rim of the Carpus Monstrance by thick, metal chains. He was naked and his body had been painted with a complex network of runes and symbols. Several bundles of cabling trailed from his skull, disappearing into the bowl of the monstrance.

As Confessor Zin made his brash, ostentatious approach, Antros could not help but notice the irony of the scene. For all Zin's finery and pomp, he failed to match the silent authority of the Chief Librarian. Mephiston's power bled out of him, reaching into the souls of even the most rabid supplicants, so that even as they chanted their catechisms they were straining to see the face of the giant waiting to greet them.

The parade came to a halt near the monstrance and Zin's servants carried his sedan chair across the rubble, scattering strips of scented parchment across the stones as they went. They helped Zin from his seat and the corpulent priest knelt, attempting to genuflect before the Chief Librarian. He struggled, gasping, as his paunch robbed him of breath, until his servants rushed to assist him. Then he rose, his face paint glistening with sweat, and smiled with forced geniality.

'Chief Librarian,' he said, 'to meet you in the flesh is more than I ever dreamed possible. Your name has become a beacon of hope throughout the

entire Cronian Sector and you can scarcely grasp how great an honour you do me by granting this audience. I would never–'

There was a clattering sound, somewhere in the darkness, as a rock dropped to the floor.

Zin faltered and stared into the shadows.

'You have nothing to fear, priest,' said Epistolary Rhacelus, distaste dripping from his aristocratic features. He raised his staff slightly and the shadows withdrew, revealing the towering sentries arranged around the walls of the Ostensorio – Librarians, watching the ruins in a silent vigil, the psychic hoods of their battleplate shimmering in readiness.

Rhacelus lowered his staff, allowing the shadows to return.

Zin attempted another forced smile, but he was clearly terrified.

Silence filled the chamber, broken only by the crackling of flames from overhead. The vast hall was lit by metal braziers, all of them borne on anti-grav platforms designed to resemble zodiacal beasts. Bronze dragons and copper snakes circled above the Space Marines, throwing animated shadows across Mephiston's motionless face, giving the illusion that he was howling or snarling.

'My lords,' said Zin, after a few minutes, looking from one Space Marine to another. Masters of the Librarium. Have you read the missives we sent? Have you grasped the crucial role you are to play in the Wars of Sanctitude? All our observances have shown that only the Chief Librarian of the Bloodied Host can be our guide, that only you can lead us to our lost brother, Arch-Cardinal Dravus, so that my brethren and I will be able to lift the terrible malediction that has befallen our most sacred world. Your face has haunted the dreams and waking dreams of every priest who has set foot on Divinus Prime. You are the Astra Angelus that was foretold in *The Book of Subjection*. My Lord, I have not slept nor eaten for days, so great is my excitement at the thought of meeting you.'

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow at the words 'nor eaten' but remained silent.

Mephiston nodded at the grand procession arrayed behind Zin. 'In honour of the old accords between this Chapter and the Ecclesiarchy, you may accompany us, but your brethren will not be required.'

Zin looked horrified. 'Accompany?' He was about to protest when he caught the warning in Rhacelus' eyes.

He nodded meekly and allowed his entourage to be escorted from the

hall. There were so many of them that it took nearly ten minutes for them to shuffle out, moving with far less theatricality than when they arrived. Nobody spoke as this exodus took place, but Zin mouthed a few prayers as he found himself quite alone with the Blood Angels.

Mephiston nodded and Antros stepped forwards. Since the revelations in the Chemic Spheres, Antros had been wrestling with a troubling question: could Mephiston be right about him? Was he destined to either save or damn the Chief Librarian? The idea of such a responsibility horrified him, but he could not rid himself of visions – visions of a peeled face and of Mephiston, surrounded by butchered priests. He sensed Rhacelus glaring at him and took a deep breath, determined to perform his role well, whatever doubts he might have about the future. He unrolled the scroll prepared for him by Scholiast Ghor and began to read from the handwritten document, his amplified voice booming through his helmet. 'Lord Mephiston, Chief Librarian of the Bloodied Host, Consul Aetheric to Commander Dante, Interlocutor of the Sacred Lineaments, Warden of the Accurst, Master of the Quorum Empyrric, Keeper of the Fifteenth Basilica and Harbinger Vindicta, who is beloved of the God-Emperor and who regards everyone with fathomless insight, has made it known to all that, from this moment on, in all matters pursuant to the following interdict…'

As Antros' words rang out through the shadows, Confessor Zin frowned, straining to catch every clause and sub-clause of the long, labyrinthine edict. Several times he shook his head, bewildered by the language, and held up a hand for a pause, but Antros simply continued with increasingly more strident language, until he reached the end of the document and held it out towards the priest. As he presented it, a pair of cherubs fluttered down from the broken vaults. Their faces were hidden behind expressionless, ivory masks and they both wore glittering golden haloes. They took the vellum, intoned some unintelligible oaths and gave it to Zin.

Zin peered at the tiny script in confusion, unsure what was expected of him. Then the cherubs fluttered away into the gloom, taking the edict with them.

Epistolary Rhacelus nodded to Antros and they turned to face the monstrance, raising their staffs and resting the metal heads on the lip of the urn-like relic. They began to walk in a slow circle, whispering what

seemed to be a random assortment of vowel sounds.

Zin gasped, making the sign of the aquila.

At a curt nod from Captain Vatrenus, one of the Tactical Marines broke ranks and gripped Zin by the arm, hauling him up the cracked, marble steps of the dais. The Blood Angel said nothing as he deposited him at the edge of the platform, not far from the huge chalice, and turned to look back at the scene unfolding before them. Zin tried to move back down the steps, but the battle-brother's grip was unyielding.

Pale fire coursed along the Librarians' staffs, igniting the rim of the monstrance and causing the filigreed metal to flicker and glow. They continued circling and, as the tips of their staffs dragged along the rim, they created a haunting, metallic drone that grew louder with every step they took. The battle-brothers of the Fourth Company fanned out around the edge of the dais and, to Zin's obvious dismay, they readied their weapons.

The droning sound became so loud that Zin clamped his hands over his ears, yelling unheard complaints as the vibrations shook his portly body.

'I am the steel in the blade,' said Mephiston. He spoke gently, but his voice rumbled through the chamber with seismic force, cracking some of the broken masonry.

Mephiston raised Vitarus and, as he did so, needles of red fire sliced from the darkness. Several of the Librarians dotted around the edges of the great hall had raised their staffs and were now linked to the Chief Librarian by strands of lambent power. The lines of psychic energy emanating from their staffs were magnified by Vitarus and united into a single column of fire, which Mephiston directed at the prone form of Prester Kohath. The blast slammed into the man and his flesh lit up as though covered in thousands of embers. He remained slumped and oblivious, showing no sign of pain, or even awareness of the ritual he was powering.

Zin was howling in panic now, but his words were lost in the din.

'I am the blood in the heart,' said Mephiston. Again, his soft tones rocked the chamber.

Lines of fire lanced out of the shadows, revealing more Librarians.

Mephiston channelled this new influx of power into Prester Kohath and the unconscious priest burned so brightly that Zin had to shield his eyes.

'I am the heat of the flame,' said Mephiston. He held his hand aloft and,

as more Librarians joined their force to his, the Chief Librarian's palm began to burn with psychic flame. Crimson runes ignited in the centre of his hand, shimmering like newly forged metal. The chamber shook with even more force as a column of blood tore from Prester Kohath's chest and slammed into the blazing runes on Mephiston's hand.

'I am the blood of Sanguinius,' said Mephiston, and the Ostensorio vanished.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Divinus Prime

An animal howled in pain. The sound was tormented and strange, as though heard through water. For a few seconds, Lexicanium Antros thought it might just be in his head. Then he noticed that his suit was droning statistics at him, describing the status of his vital functions and the integrity of his armour, as though he had survived some kind of crash. The suit spoke of temperate environmental conditions and a life-sustaining atmosphere, and he realised that Mephiston's blood rite had been a success – he was on the world that Zin had lost. He was on Divinus Prime. He opened his eyes but saw only a blinding whiteness. His eyes were adjusting quickly to the glare but he could see nothing clearly. He thought he could make out a forest spread out around him, but there was something oddly regimented about the rows of soaring, pale trunks.

There was another tormented howl, louder and more agonised than the first. Antros tried to move and managed to wrench an arm free with a crunch of breaking stone. He blinked several times, dimming his visor further and slowly revealing a dizzying sight – he was hundreds of feet up in the air, embedded in one of the structures he had mistaken for trees. As his vision continued to improve, he saw that they were man-made: sky-scraping, bone-white columns that were strikingly beautiful – pale, twisted spires, intricately woven from millions of spars and arches, giving each

one the delicate, honeycombed appearance of a needle-shaped seedpod. It was only as he looked at the tower he was perched on that he realised the incredible truth: this forest of white towers, tumbling towards the horizon in every direction, was made entirely of bones. The planet was an ossuary, built on a scale that left him dazed. How many millions of bones must have been used to create this endless vista? He looked at the bones that surrounded him and saw how oddly liquefied they looked – every femur and rib slumped and merged with the bone below, sagging and looping like folds of lace. He tapped the bone beneath his hand, a contorted skull, and it crumbled at his touch. The bones had been petrified. They had been here so long they had been transformed into crumbling stone sculptures.

Countless thousands of bodies were stacked beneath him in this single, huge column. He saw the skeletons of humans and other creatures he did not recognise, in such incredible numbers that they had become a kind of morbid, abstract art – a gleaming exposition of death, baking slowly under a heavy, somnolent sun.

As Antros grew accustomed to the disorientating angle, he realised why he had mistaken the fossil sculptures for trees. As well as a central trunk, hundreds of bodies wide and thousands deep, there were countless ‘branches’ jutting out over a flat, sun-baked scrubland that stretched out below him. The scale of the construction was staggering. Even if Antros ignored the grim nature of their contents, the idea that someone had built structures of this size was bewildering – they equalled even the greatest basilicas and fortresses of Baal.

Antros tore his gaze from the surreal landscape and saw that his legs were sunk inside a carefully designed architrave, constructed from a coiled loop of spines, and one of his arms was trapped in an elegant turret formed from hundreds of ribcages.

The pained howl echoed through the bones again, and he wrenched his arm free. Chalk dust enveloped him as he clambered onto a balustrade and looked out across the fields of white spires. There was no sign of the others. Had he arrived here alone? Mephiston had warned them all that even he had never performed such an ambitious blood rite before – translating several beings through the immaterium, using nothing but his force of will. It was dangerous to say the least. But Mephiston had a way of making the impossible seem commonplace. None of them would have

dreamt of doubting him. But what if he was the only one who had reached Divinus Prime intact? What if the others had been left in the Ostensorio?

As Antros scoured the landscape for a sign of them, it occurred to him that this might not even be Divinus Prime. But, if it was… If this *was* Divinus Prime, then the responsibility had fallen to him. He would have to discover what had hidden the Cardinal World from view. Mephiston would be relying on *him* to make contact with the rest of the Imperium.

'Lexicanium Antros,' said a voice from above.

He looked up and saw a Blood Angel, entangled in a grand archway formed from a single, enormous ribcage. He saw from the warrior's armour markings that it was Battle-Brother Mandacus. The bones that had trapped Mandacus must have once belonged to an equine creature, but of a species far larger than a horse, because they dwarfed the Blood Angel. Mandacus was shaking violently and he had his hands held over his head. He was staring at the silent bone cities that surrounded them.

'*Quick*,' he said, his voice contorted by pain. Antros realised that Mandacus was the source of the bestial howling he had heard. He was in agony. 'Get me out of this.' Mandacus' voice was barely intelligible. 'I'm *inside* it.'

Antros saw that, from the waist down, his armour had merged with the stone, and where his body met the petrified bones there was a quickly spreading skirt of blood, vivid and shocking against the white stone. He was bleeding to death.

Antros began hauling himself up the tower towards him, but the weight of his power armour caused the chalky fossils to crumble, slowing his progress as Mandacus began to howl again.

'I am the blood of Sanguinius,' said a quiet voice.

Reality blurred, as though shaken in a tumbler of water.

The bone tower vanished and Antros was back in the Ostensorio again. The Librarians around the edge of the hall were lit up by their blazing staffs. He could see their souls, hunched over them in the form of spectral angels, wings spread and eyes burning with empyrric fire.

Antros was about to cry out to them, to explain what had happened to Mandacus, but before he could talk the Ostensorio was gone.

He found himself on a broad transitway – a road of chalky, white stone, rippling with the heat of a late afternoon sun, blurring the horizon with

heat haze.

He was once more surrounded by the bone trees, but now he was looking up at them from ground level. The size of them warped his perspective as he craned his neck to see their pinnacles. They seemed to bend, leaning over him like tired old men stooping to examine the ground.

As Antros studied them, he noticed something that troubled him. For as long as he could remember, he had heard the galaxy whispering to him, filling his mind with half-heard prayers and visions. The elders of his tribe had feared his second sight and, had his life taken a different turn, he would have been executed as a warlock or sequestered onto one of Terra's mysterious Black Ships for a fate unknown. As a successful Blood Angels aspirant, however, he had found his way into Epistolary Rhacelus' care and begun the slow, still incomplete task of harnessing his mind. But now the voices had been silenced. The idea pained him, as if he had just lost a part of his body.

'The Dolorous Towers,' whispered somebody.

Antros thought that perhaps his powers had returned, then he looked down and saw that he was no longer alone. Kneeling beside him, his white face paint streaked with tears, was Confessor Zin. It was he who had given a name to these soaring ossuaries and he kept repeating the words, rocking with his hands clasped together in prayer. He was quite oblivious to anything else.

Standing a few feet away was Rhacelus, his head bowed and thrown into shadow. He was tracing runes into the dust with his force sword and talking to himself in hushed, urgent tones.

Further down the road was Mephiston. He was crouched in the shadows, his hand pressed onto the ground, embers drifting up from between his fingers. He stood, wiped some blood from his palm and strode off away from them down the road, hair trailing behind him like a vivid, white pennant. Captain Vatrenus and his two squads of Tactical Marines marched behind him, scanning the roadside as they went, peering at Divinus Prime through the sights of their bolters. Squad Seriphus took one side of the road and Squad Hestias the other. In their crimson armour they looked like blood, pouring towards the horizon. Antros noticed that there was no sign of Battle-Brother Mandacus, and a few others had vanished too. Clearly not everyone had survived the journey. Two squads had set out, along with

the three Librarians, Captain Vatrenus and an Apothecary, but now Sergeant Hestias was only accompanied by two of his men and Sergeant Seriphus only led three. That left twelve Blood Angels in total. Enough to face anything the planet could throw at them, decided Antros.

'Lexicanium,' said a voice from behind him and he turned to face Zin. 'Could you help me up?' asked the priest, wiping the tears from his eyes.

Antros nodded vaguely, still disorientated by the psychic silence that had enveloped him. He stepped to Confessor Zin's side and hauled him to his feet. Zin looked at him with wild, glistening eyes. 'Do you understand?' he asked, grasping at Antros' armour. 'Do you know what you're seeing?'

Antros shrugged. 'I have seen ossuaries before, but never on this scale. In the catacombs beneath the monasteries I have seen monks preserve their dead in great caskets of bones, but nothing like this.'

Zin shook his head. 'Brother-Librarian, the Dolorous Towers are not simple tombs. They were not built by the hand of man.' Zin reeled away from Antros, staggering across the road and looking up at the white towers. His words took on an impassioned, fiery tone that he had obviously honed over decades of preaching.

Rhacelus looked up from his work to watch the performance.

'When the Emperor first came to this world,' said Zin, 'it had another name. A name too dreadful for me to utter, but let it be simply said that it was a benighted pit – a well of profanity and false worship. The souls of this world were sick with corruption. They turned on the Emperor and His missionaries, assaulting them with hexes and vile oaths, calling out the things that lurk in the space between spaces. Even the God-Emperor could not sanctify entire nations of unbelievers, so He ordered His servant, a moon wolf by the name of Lupercal, to descend from the heavens and watch over the daemon-worshippers while the God-Emperor forged a weapon so powerful it could leech their dark arts from their hearts and leave them powerless. As Lupercal harried the treacherous occultists, the God-Emperor delved beneath the ground and began to devour the molten core of their world. For a hundred days He feasted on the inferno, His flesh sloughing from His bones as He ate until He was no more than an ember of divine power, flickering in the dark places that mortal sight can never hope to comprehend. On the hundredth day, He emerged, and vomited a sword forged from the planet's heart. As He rose, reborn from the flames,

the God–Emperor raised the blade and commanded the storm-wracked skies.'

Zin levelled a trembling finger at the nearest of the bone towers. 'And the planet answered! From the bowels of this world rose a great symbol of his power – an endless multitude of mountain-sized blades, made from the bones of every non-believer who had ever died here.' Zin staggered, drunk on his own rapture. 'The holy blades soared into the heavens, leeching the sorcery from witch and warlock alike, until the heretics squirmed beneath the towers' righteous judgement. Some called them Dolorous Towers and others called them the Penitent Trees, but all saw the God-Emperor's wrath made manifest. Then, these glorious monuments unleashed the magic they had captured from the heretics and hurled it into the blade the Emperor had forged beneath the world's core.'

Zin paused, gasping for breath.

'The people of this world saw truth for the first time in centuries,' he continued. 'And as the glamour fell from their eyes, the heretics fell to their knees. Before the Penitent Trees they swore a terrible, binding oath that they called simply the Vow. Then the God-Emperor saw a wonderful truth, that His blade had created a people more devout than any other of His subjects, so He gave their world a new, more appropriate name – Divinus Prime.'

'What was the oath?' asked Antros dragging his gaze from the towering obelisks to the wild-eyed priest.

The fervour vanished from Zin's eyes and he staggered to a halt, caught off guard by the question. His expression changed in an instant, from fiery zeal to something resembling guilt. The change was so dramatic that Antros almost laughed in surprise. He guessed that the Vow was connected in some way to the thing Zin was desperate to avoid mentioning – the Blade Petrific.

When Zin spoke again, his voice was muted and hesitant. 'They swore to protect this world until–'

'Until what?' asked Mephiston. No one had heard the Chief Librarian's return and Zin flinched in surprise.

Rhacelus rose to his feet, leaving his runes and saluting the Chief Librarian.

'Until the Day of Wrath,' said Zin, after taking a deep breath and raising

his chin. ‘When both heretic and believer shall receive a just reward.’

Mephiston seemed about to press him for more, but then he nodded and waved down the road to where Captain Vatrenus and the two squads of Tactical Marines were waiting, gathered in orderly ranks, their guns held across their chests. ‘There are people ahead of us on this road,’ said Mephiston. ‘I can hear them praying. They are no more than an hour’s march away, but their prayers are growing weaker. We do not have long to reach them.’ He looked at Rhacelus. ‘Finish your work, Gaius. Seal the rift and follow as quickly as you can.’ Then he took Zin by the shoulder. ‘Walk with me, confessor. Tell me what you know of the geography of this world.’

As the Chief Librarian marched away, Zin staggered and lurched after him, cringing like an obese child being reprimanded by its parent.

‘This place has a colourful past, then,’ said Antros, giving Rhacelus a sideways glance after watching the pair head off down the road. ‘Strange that these magically summoned towers so resemble all the ossuaries seen on other worlds – all of them known to be the simple burial practice of the indigenous population.’

‘It is easy to dismiss such picturesque legends, neophyte,’ said Rhacelus, ‘but faith in the Emperor is rarely worth mocking, whatever form it takes.’

‘Faith does not have to make fools of us,’ replied Antros.

‘Oh, but myths can be so much more enlightening than the dreary truth.’ Rhacelus glanced at the petrified spires. ‘Holy blades, summoned into being by the God-Emperor Himself. Such ideas have kept this world pure while so many around it have fallen.’

Antros shook his head. ‘Pure? We have yet to see what the priests’ ideas have done to this world. Perhaps we should wait a little while before we praise them for their devotion. From what the Chief Librarian described, they are as confused and violent as the rest of the sector.’

Rhacelus studied Antros through the visor of his helmet. ‘Would you rather Zin looked to other gods?’

‘Of course not.’ Antros was irritated to be so misunderstood. ‘The God-Emperor’s light is all we have. But surely you and I are seekers of truth? We must draw a distinction between pure faith and obscure superstition. What use is the God-Emperor’s light if we are not clear-sighted enough to see it? Why else do we spend our hours recording and studying?’ He

looked at the towers. ‘These are tombs. The dead of this world have been left to rest in the open air, rather than buried beneath the sod. And the atmosphere of Divinus Prime is such that the bones are calcified and preserved. These are quite mundane facts, rather than anything more elevated.’

Rhacelus shrugged. ‘Perhaps, perhaps not. It is right that you should place such value in our records and archives, neophyte, but do not let that shield you from the truth. The entire store of knowledge in our Librarium amounts to a guttering candle, illuminating one corner of a vast, unknowable canvas.’

Antros looked at the uninspiring shape of Zin, stumbling after Mephiston, and decided that some candles illuminated more than others. He tried to reach out with his mind to see what the priest had been holding back, but the odd silence that had filled his thoughts seemed to have affected his other abilities. He could see no glimpse of Zin’s thoughts.

‘My lord,’ he said, glancing at Rhacelus. ‘Your vision – your second sight – is it…?’

Rhacelus nodded and looked up at the clouds. ‘We are now behind whatever barriers have hidden Divinus Prime. We are blind.’

Rhacelus stepped back to the runes he had carved into the road, resting the tip of his sword against the circle surrounding the symbols. Both circle and runes erupted into blue flames that licked and crackled around the design. The Librarian kept his head lowered as the runes lifted from the ground like embers, shimmering and rotating, following the complex series of lines and intersections that he had described in the dust.

There was an explosion of noise as the fire summoned a peculiar audience – dozens of crows landed on the chalk road, their black forms in stark contrast to the white stone as they hopped and fluttered around the edge of the shimmering circle. There were dozens of the birds and their raucous, barked laughter rang out strangely through the barren fields. The landscape was otherwise devoid of life, and it was clear that the birds had been drawn by the power of the Librarian’s incantation. Rhacelus paid the birds no heed and with a single, muttered syllable he completed the ritual. A blinding column of light shone up from the circle, illuminating his regal features as it rose past him and pointed up into the heavens.

Antros gave a nod of respect as the column of fire reached even higher

than the ossuaries. It spread across the dun belly of the clouds, gilding the sky like lightning hurled back at the firmament. He did not fully understand this, but he knew Rhacelus was sealing the portal Mephiston had used to bring them here. Whatever the exact nature of the conjuration, it made a glorious sight as it danced fitfully across the clouds, writing blazing words of power across the sky.

Antros gasped as the lights revealed something unexpected. Since they had arrived on Divinus Prime, the sky had been hidden behind low, gloomy clouds but as the blue flames flickered overhead, they revealed a peculiar sight. In the few gaps of clear sky that were revealed, there should have been a deepening dusk, littered with a few early evening stars, but instead, the clouds parted to reveal a mirror image of the landscape below. Each of the delicate funereal spires was clearly reflected in the firmament, pointing back down towards the ground.

'Does your science explain that?' asked Rhacelus, without looking at Antros.

Antros said nothing, and Rhacelus snatched his sword from the circle and backed away from the column of light. The flames died immediately, plunging them back into the dusky half-light. All that remained was a faint glow around the runes he had inscribed in the ground. Rhacelus dropped to one knee and traced the shapes with his finger. 'This world has been masked for a reason.' He looked up at the sky. 'To hide something.'

'We should catch up with the others,' he said, standing and striding past Antros.

As they hurried from the site of the ritual, they were accompanied by the hoarse cackling of the crows, launching themselves back into the twilight.

After an hour's brisk march, they reached a narrow valley that crossed the landscape for as far as they could see, a great scar in the plains, hundreds of feet deep. The road dropped away beneath them, plunging down a steep incline before slicing across the valley floor towards a walled city that looked back at them from the top of the opposite slope, watching over the valley like an ancient sentinel. Even from such a distance, they could see that it was a city of bones – a tomb city, built of the same, intricately woven fossils as the towers. It was a dwarf beside the Penitent Trees that surrounded it, but the rotunda at its centre was clearly a colossal structure.

Dusk was quickly becoming night and its ivory dome gleamed against the indigo sky like a fallen moon.

Confessor Zin whispered a prayer and made the sign of the aquila as he saw trails of smoke drifting up from behind the sheer, white walls.

'Do you recognise the place?' asked Mephiston, turning to Zin.

The priest nodded, looking dazed. 'Tarn Abbey.' He waved his crozius at the tiny clusters of light that peppered the gloomy valley below. 'The monasteries that cover these plains all belong to the diocese of Cardinal Vectis.' He looked back at the fortified city opposite. 'His abbey is built around Lake Tenos.' Zin's face paint was still streaked and smeared from his tears and, to Antros at least, he looked like a savage – a berserker, ready to charge screaming down into the darkened valley. 'It's one of the holiest sites on Divinus Prime. Lake Tenos marks the spot at which the God-Emperor emerged from the Underworld.' He gave Mephiston a wary glance then looked back at the flames.

Antros was about to ask a question when he noticed that Mephiston was not looking at the city, but at the road that crossed the valley. The white stone made it easy to follow its route through the gloomy scrubland, but it took Antros a few more seconds to notice that it was lined with winged shapes – birds of some kind. He thought at first they might be more crows, then he dismissed the idea, realising how huge the birds would have to be. He blinked a few times and his visor zoomed in on one of the shapes.

'By the Throne,' he muttered as he saw the gruesome truth. The road was lined with crucifixions. The poor souls had been caged in wooden frames that resembled eagles, and their emaciated bodies were naked and scorched – blackened by days of exposure to the fierce sun.

The other Librarians did not reply and he realised that they had already seen what he had seen, as had Captain Vatrenus and the other Blood Angels.

'What is it?' demanded Zin, looking around the group, painfully aware that he was missing something dreadful.

Mephiston shook his head. 'It is as I warned you, Confessor Zin. Divinus Prime is at war with itself.'

'No. I will not believe it,' said Zin, but his denial lacked the vehemence he had shown on Baal, and, as they began their descent, he prayed quietly under his breath, glancing warily at the shadow-haunted slopes.

By the time they reached the first of the corpses, the last traces of dusk had faded and darkness had fallen. The Adeptus Astartes had no need of light to see their way, but they knew their mortal companions did, so the Tactical Marines triggered the lumens fixed to their bolters, revealing the full horror of the scene. Their light picked out the corpses, giving them the appearance of tormented, grimacing actors, caught in the footlights as they ended their sad tragedy before a backdrop of pure pitch.

Zin howled as he saw the first crucifixion. The dead priest, slumped pitifully inside the bird-shaped cage, was clearly a member of his own order. His robes had been stained dark brown with dried blood, but a few patches of white revealed their original colour, and his frontal hair had been shaved away in just the same shape as Zin's. He also wore the same medallion as Zin – a capital I with an iron halo at its centre, surrounding a skull device.

'Oh, my beloved brother,' groaned Zin. 'Rejoiceth in your fate. Your light will burn as one with the God-Emperor. You hadst faith and you will hath succour.'

Mephiston nodded to Captain Vatrenus and he led some of his men ahead, scouring the gruesome cages for signs of movement.

The group waited in respectful silence until Zin had finished his prayer. He turned and looked up at Mephiston. 'Astra Angelus,' he said, his voice weak, 'such an atrocity cannot go unpunished.' He looked at the Tactical Marines' flickering lights as they moved on down the road, revealing countless more crucifixions. 'The dogs behind this must face the Emperor's judgement.'

Antros expected the Chief Librarian to balk at such a demanding tone, but Mephiston nodded in reply. Then he lifted Vitarus and showed Confessor Zin the blade. It was pulsing with a hungry, vermillion light.

They continued their march down the road in grim silence, attempting to ignore the mouldering colonnade that flanked them. Antros mouthed a prayer for each one he passed – not a prayer for their easy passing, but a promise that they would be avenged.

They were halfway across the valley when they saw that Captain Vatrenus and some of his men were waiting for them, huddled over something in the middle of the road. As they approached, Antros saw that it was one of the crucified priests. He was still alive and Vatrenus' men had cut him down

from the eagle cage. He was wailing and trying to lash out at the Space Marines, but his feeble limbs were useless against their Adeptus Astartes bulk.

Vatrenus' Sanguinary Priest, Brother Casali, was attempting to treat the man's wounds with the medical equipment attached to his wrist armour, a bulky device called a narthecium, bristling with syringes and blades. He was moving with great care. The drugs in his narthecium were not intended for a mortal man, much less a skeletal wreck of a mortal man. Casali was clearly having some success, though. By the time the rest of the group reached the scene, the priest's breathing had calmed and he was looking up at his rescuers with less mania. He was so wasted and filthy that he looked as though he had been exhumed rather than saved, but there was something proud in his features that, along with his gore splattered beard, marked him out as a man of importance. Antros imagined that he must have once been a great leader or prophet, before being brought so low. At the sight of Confessor Zin the priest cried out, blood spraying from his cracked lips.

'Brother!' he said, his voice little more than a croak. 'This valley is tainted! Do not leave me here! Take me back the way you came. We must get word to the Labyrinth!'

Zin hurried over and dropped to his knees, cradling the skeletal man in his arms. 'What monster did this to you?' he said, his voice full of outrage.

The man tried to sit up, but the Sanguinary Priest held him down and shook his head.

Zin nodded in agreement and encouraged the priest to lie back. 'What is your name, brother?' he said. 'What happened here?'

The man lay back, clasping Zin's arm, clearly terrified of the Blood Angel. 'Prester Brennus,' he said, pausing to look for a sign of recognition in Zin's face. Seeing none, he continued. 'We must leave here and take word to Arch-Cardinal Dravus. He must know that Tarn Abbey has fallen to the Enlightened. The Unbegotten Prince was here!'

Mephiston appeared out of the darkness, his bloodless face lit up in the torchlight.

The man gasped in terror and tried to back away.

'Calm yourself,' said Zin. 'There is nothing to fear, Prester Brennus.' He

lowered his voice to an awed whisper. ‘This is the Astra Angelus.’

The name clearly meant nothing to the man, so Zin tried another tack. ‘He is Mephiston, the Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels. He is one of the Adeptus Astartes.’

The mention of Adeptus Astartes clearly *did* mean something to the man, but nothing that lessened his fear. If anything, he looked even more terrified.

‘Enlightened?’ Mephiston asked, looking at Zin for an explanation.

Brennus shook his head, confused. The movement caused him to pass out and his head lolled back on the arms of the Sanguinary Priest. His eyes rolled back in their sockets, almost entirely bloodshot, and he let out a rattling moan. He looked like a collection of bones hurled to the ground as part of a divination rite, held together by a thin layer of skin and little else.

The Sanguinary Priest placed the man on the ground and slid a device under the skin of his forearm. It looked to Antros like one of the tools used in the Librarium scriptoria for illuminating texts: a flat, sharpened spike of metal, like a stylus. Casali muttered a few words as it broke the man’s skin and then he pulled the blade out again, sputtering a few droplets of green, viscous chemicals as he did so.

The priest’s eyes opened and he lifted his head to continue talking, seemingly unaware of the interruption.

‘Where have you come from?’ Prester Brennus asked Zin, looking past him and making out the rest of the group for the first time. ‘How have you not heard of the Enlightened?’

‘We only arrived here today, brother. We have travelled here from Baal.’

‘Off-worlders?’ gasped the man. ‘How is that possible?’ He tried to point at the sky. ‘Since the Miracle, we have been unable to contact anyone.’ His voice teetered on the brink of tears. ‘It is over a year since we heard from the synod. We did not even know if the Ministorum still endured.’

‘I am Confessor Zin, Accensor Prophetic of the Luminous Throne, and I can assure you with all my heart that we very much endure. You may have been isolated by this Miracle as you name it, but you have never been forgotten. With every day that passed we have been working towards a time when we could step on these holy rocks and return them to the God-Emperor’s light.’ Zin gestured at Mephiston. ‘Every seer and prophet in the Cronian Sector has been granted a wondrous vision.’ Zin’s eyes burned

in the dark. ‘A vision of an Astra Angelus who will lead us through the veils that surround Divinus Prime so that we may rid you of this curse.’ Zin paused for breath. ‘We are here to save you, brother.’

Prester Brennus dragged himself into a sitting position, gripping Zin’s forearm with one hand and pointing at the crucified corpses with the other. ‘Then you should know how we have been betrayed. These murders are all the work of the false prophet. He calls himself a prince, while preaching death and violence against his own kind!’ The cadaverous priest was spitting and snorting as he gripped harder, his bony fingers sinking into Zin’s meaty flesh. ‘He has torn us apart with his hateful creed.’

‘The Unbegotten Prince?’ asked Mephiston from the shadows.

The priest flinched at the sound of his voice and replied to Zin, rather than the Chief Librarian. ‘No one is sure where he came from. Some say that he was once a simple anchorite, living in the caves beneath Volgatis, but there is nothing priestly about him that I could see. If he ever had any true faith, he has abandoned…’ Brennus paused to cough up another thick, crimson gobbet, grimacing at the sight of his own blood before continuing. ‘He claims that his followers have given him that absurd, sacrilegious title. They call him the Unbegotten Prince and claim that he was not born, but sent to Divinus Prime as a fragment of the God-Emperor’s being – a divine avatar that fell from the sky.’ Brennus sneered. ‘Vile. Irreligious. Such posturing is worse than…’ he waved weakly at the eagle cages, ‘than these monstrosities.’

Mephiston glanced at the city looking down on them from the far side of the valley, its pale dome still visible in the moonlight. ‘And this Unbegotten Prince – what *is* his creed?’

Prester Brennus replied to Mephiston without turning to face him, his face contorted by disgust at what he had to convey. ‘He says that everything we believe is a lie. That all our centuries of devotion, honouring the Vow, was a mistake. He claims that tradition is nothing, that permanence is nothing, that–’

‘Permanence?’

‘Yes. The prince beguiles his followers. He tells them that we can only serve the God-Emperor by abandoning our strictures and tenets, by changing and rethinking everything we do.’ Brennus looked at Zin. ‘He mocks us, confessor! He calls us slaves to hieratical dogma. He says that

we must learn new ways to think, new ways to be. “Progress through change,” he says.’ The disdain dripped from his lips. ‘Change!’

Mephiston watched him closely and then looked back at the distant dome of the abbey.

‘The abbey is lost,’ groaned Brennus, his voice growing weaker. ‘You must change your route. Whatever lies beyond those gates is not fit for honest eyes.’ He pawed at Zin’s robes again. ‘You must take word to the arch-cardinal. Tell him what has been done here.’

‘But what of Cardinal Vectis?’ asked Zin, looking up at the city. ‘Is he still in there?’

Brennus shook his head and clawed at his blistered scalp in distress, sending rivulets of fresh blood down over his face. Then he pointed at one of the nearby crucifixions. ‘They showed the cardinal no more mercy than the rest of us.’ His anguish give him a renewed burst of vigour and he spoke clearly again. ‘Leave this valley, brother. Do not think of those poor souls up there. There is nothing to be done. The prince may be leading his cultists to the Labyrinth by now and the priests there *could* still be saved. If you hurry to the arch-cardinal, you can warn him that the abbey has fallen. He still has time to recall his full strength to the Labyrinth and prepare his defences.’

‘The Labyrinth?’ asked Rhacelus, keeping a distance from the priest, as though not wanting to be tainted by his pitiful condition.

Brennus peered into the darkness over Zin’s shoulder, dismayed to see other hulking giants looming over him.

‘*You* know of the Labyrinth, surely, confessor?’ he said to Zin.

Zin nodded and turned to Rhacelus. ‘Mormotha. The capital. Seat of the arch-cardinal. The locals call it the Labyrinth. It is there that I have asked your Chief Librarian to lead us. If we can reach Mormotha I can consult with my brother and find out what has befallen Divinus Prime.’ He looked around for Mephiston and saw that the Chief Librarian was still studying the ruined city.

‘Lord Mephiston,’ said Zin, ‘will you do as my brother asks? Mormotha is four or five days’ march from here.’

Mephiston continued staring into the darkness. ‘Four days’ march. And how long ago did this Unbegotten Prince strike out for the Labyrinth?’

Prester Brennus was struggling to speak. ‘The abbey fell… It fell… two

nights ago. He may have marched straight on… for the capital.'

Rhacelus stepped to Mephiston's side. 'And we have no transport. If the cultists have headed that way they would reach the city before us.'

Mephiston nodded. 'Prester Brennus,' he said. 'Would we find vehicles of any kind in the abbey?'

Brennus nodded and then shook his head as he realised Mephiston's intentions. He tried to look at Confessor Zin, but his eyes struggled to focus. 'The abbey is lost,' he managed to gasp.

'It was,' said Mephiston, glancing at Captain Vatrenus.

Vatrenus nodded in reply and waved his squads on, ordering them to advance boldly along the road, making no attempt to hide their approach.

'My lord!' exclaimed Confessor Zin. 'Did you hear what he said? We must leave!'

'Brother Casali,' said Mephiston, ignoring Zin and glancing at the Apothecary. Casali nodded in reply and hauled Prester Brennus to his feet.

'Take me to your abbey, priests. I will show you how the sons of Sanguinius deal with heretics.'

Despite the haunting silence that hung over the valley, there was no mistaking the violence that had recently befallen Tarn Abbey. The gates had been smashed and the triumphal arches were scorched and blackened. The windows that looked out at them were lightless and blind, but Mephiston raised his hand for the small column to halt. He looked up at the city for a while, silhouetted before its vast, ivory walls, then he nodded at Captain Vatrenus, who directed Squad Hestias with a silent, chopping gesture, ordering them to fan out around the outside of the building as he and the rest of the Blood Angels made straight for the gaping mouth of the abbey.

Mephiston and Rhacelus walked boldly towards the gates, flanked by Captain Vatrenus and the battle-brothers of Squad Seriphus. To Antros' frustration, he was ordered to follow at a safe distance, acting as nursemaid to the two priests, one of whom could barely walk. He marched before Confessor Zin but he had to half carry Prester Brennus.

The group approached the sinuous, ornately worked fossils that used to house the abbey's towering doors. To Antros it felt as though they were walking through the jaws of a skeletal behemoth, its vast, ivory mouth opening onto the darkness within. A terrible stink drifted through the

portal – the harsh, acrid tang of burned hair and meat.

As the Librarians strode forwards, they raised their force swords, igniting them with a thought and splashing crimson light across the buildings within.

It was a charnel house. The light of their swords painted everything a nightmarish hue but, even in the broad light of day, the abbey would have made a brutal sight. The source of the smell was revealed. The square was heaped with blackened, charred corpses. Antros was so disgusted by the sight that it took him a few moments to notice what was so peculiar about the scene.

'Nothing else is burned,' he said as they picked their way through the remains.

'Throne,' muttered Zin, looking around at the porticoes and balustrades that surrounded them. 'How can that be?' The fire that had consumed the bodies had left no mark on any of the buildings. The gleaming skulls and ribcages that made up the walls and pillars were completely untouched by fire.

'Warpfire,' replied Antros, sensing the hand of a powerful sorcerer.

Confessor Zin's face crumpled with fear as he saw the full extent of the massacre spread out before them. He recoiled, eyes straining in horror, clutching his medallion. 'We *must* leave!' he hissed. 'Prester Brennus is right – there is nothing to be done here. We must go.'

Only Zin spoke of it, but they all felt the presence he was referring to. The aether-light of the Librarians' swords had barely raked the steps of the first sacristy and the rest of the ruins were bathed in darkness, but the shadows were horribly animated. They all sensed they were not alone.

Captain Vatrenus ordered Squad Seriphus to spread out around the courtyard, scouring the butcher-slab streets for any signs of life. 'Report, Sergeant Hestias. What do you see?'

'*We entered through the postern gate,*' said Sergeant Hestias. '*No sign of movement. We've reached the bell tower now, to the east of the basilica. Nothing but corpses.*'

Mephiston had reached the bottom steps of the sacristy, still flanked by Rhacelus. The sanguine light of their swords washed over the steps and lit up the entrance. The doors were intact but they had been flung open.

Standing at the threshold, draped in shadow, was a man.

‘You’re not looking hard enough,’ drawled Rhacelus.

‘*Shall we return?*’ voxed Sergeant Seriphus.

‘Hold your positions,’ replied Mephiston as he began climbing the steps towards the figure.

‘Wait outside the gate,’ said Antros to his two wards and jogged across the square towards the sacristy.

‘Who seeks enlightenment?’ asked the figure at the top of the steps. The voice was friendly and full of warmth. The stranger walked into the light and Antros saw that he was massive, almost as big as Mephiston, and was wearing some kind of archaic, white power armour, edged with gold trim. Antros frowned as he studied the design – beautiful, baroque details that were not quite the same as Adeptus Astartes wargear, but still oddly familiar. It reminded him of the knights shown in the Librarium’s oldest friezes. The regal-looking warrior seemed to have stepped out of prehistory. There was a helmet at his belt, topped with a black, transverse crest and his heraldry was a stylised version of the Adeptus Ministorum symbol – a capital I emblazoned with a spiked halo and a skull. In the centre of his cuirass was an enormous sapphire that gleamed with inner light. He wore a gilded bolt pistol at his belt and had an exotic-looking sword in his hand – a falchion of some kind, its curved blade engraved with an intricate pattern of whorls and loops. All of this finery only served as a frame for the warrior’s beaming, jovial face. He had ruddy, tanned skin and black, perfectly straight hair that reached down to his waist, making him almost the reverse of the pale, white-haired Mephiston.

‘I am Pieter Zorambus,’ he said, smiling broadly. ‘And I bless you all for seeking guidance in such dark times. May I ask your names?’ He held out a hand to Mephiston in greeting, seeming genuinely delighted.

Mephiston studied the ebullient warrior in silence and a tense hush fell over the courtyard.

Zorambus continued smiling, but it began to look a little strained as the seconds rolled on.

Mephiston looked past him, into the shadowy interior of the sacristy. Then he did a strange thing: he stumbled slightly, as though unsteady on his feet. He looked back towards the gates and Antros saw that his eyes had filled with blood, just as they had in the Carceri Arcanum, but this time the red orbs were bleeding light, as though there were fire inside the

Chief Librarian's skull.

Antros was about to speak when Mephiston turned back to face Zorambus and raised his gun.

Zorambus' smile changed to one of cheerful disbelief and he raised his hands in a placatory gesture.

Then his head jolted back, hit by a single shot from Mephiston's plasma pistol.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tarn Abbey, Divinus Prime

The sound of Mephiston's shot echoed around the city and Pieter Zorambus toppled backwards towards the doorway of the sacristy, arms flailing as the force of the headshot lifted his feet from the ground. Rather than collapsing, however, he remained suspended in mid-air, juddering like an oversized marionette. It was as though someone had paused a playback on a pict unit, looping the moment of his death. Antros had reached the other Librarians by now and saw what happened next with disturbing clarity. Zorambus shook with increasing violence until his outline began to shimmer and he started to vanish from view.

'My lord,' said Antros, but before he could say more, Zorambus' violent fit ceased and the Blood Angels were left facing two Unbegotten Princes instead of one. They both smiled.

'I *understand* your concern,' said the two identical Pieters. Neither of them showed any sign of a head wound and both held up their hands in the same placating gesture. 'But I believe we are trying to achieve the same goal. If we could exchange words rather than gunfire I could explain how we could work–'

Captain Vatrenus muttered an oath and unloaded several bolter rounds into the two warriors, sending them staggering backwards. Again, rather than falling, they shook violently for a few seconds and then duplicated.

‘We are all sons of the God-Emperor,’ said four Pieters, wearing matching smiles. ‘And we all desire to see His treasures unearthed. Whatever differences you imagine we might have, they can so easily be–’

There was a roar of bolter fire as the battle-brothers of Squad Seriphus unleashed a barrage of shells.

‘Wait!’ cried Antros, but his voice was drowned out by the gunfire and, when the smoke cleared, they were facing dozens of Unbegotten Princes, all shaking their heads with identical expressions of disappointment as they raised their falchions and pistols and strode down the steps.

Ceramite clashed against ceramite as the white-armoured knights met the crimson ranks of Tactical Marines.

‘To me!’ growled Captain Vatrenus over the vox, summoning the rest of his men to the square.

The Space Marines formed a wall of armour in front of Mephiston and the other Librarians, fighting with brutal efficiency. But for every warrior that fell, two more appeared. They were gradually filling the courtyard with ranks of identical, white-armoured knights whose smiles had been replaced with determined scowls as they forced the Blood Angels back across the mounds of corpses.

Antros sought Mephiston out in the melee, wondering if he would act as he had on Thermia, when the sepolcrali surrounded him.

Mephiston powered up the steps, flinging the white knights aside with ease. When he reached the doors of the sacristy, he turned to face the battle below and raised Vitarus over his head. The sword’s blade vanished, replaced by a column of vermillion fire.

Antros gasped in shock as heat pulsed through his gauntlet, causing him to drop his bolt pistol. He saw that all the other Blood Angels had been stricken in the same way, forced to defend themselves with their swords and combat knives as the enemy piled into them.

Mephiston sliced his flaming sword through the air and the knights nearest to him lit up like beacons, their white battleplate spilling red light as they toppled back down the steps. When they crashed to the flagstones, they writhed and howled, adding torrents of hissing blood to the shimmering lights. The heat coming from them was so intense that the air around them rippled as they died and their armour buckled, as though crushed in a vacuum.

‘Hollow Fire!’ roared Epistolary Rhacelus, who was on the far side of the crowd.

Rhacelus had not directed his words to Antros, but he immediately understood the reference. His training might not be complete but he had studied every word of *The Glutted Scythe* – Mephiston’s treatise on lethal invocations. The tome was forbidden to less experienced scholars such as Antros, but he had acquired a copy many years ago. The Exhortation of Hollow Fire sprang to his lips almost unbidden, begging to be spoken out loud, but he suppressed the urge. He felt the invocation blazing through the thoughts of Rhacelus and Mephiston and his hunger to join them was almost overwhelming, but he had never attempted such a thing before. To feel such potent sorcery, so close by, and not be able to taste its power, was a torment.

The white-armoured knights howled in triumph as they saw the Tactical Marines drop their guns; then their howls took on a different tone as red fire ripped through their bodies. Rhacelus had raised his sword in mimicry of Mephiston’s pose, weaving dazzling strands of light and sending a rippling wave of death through the enemy ranks.

The veteran Librarians worked as one to create a fierce corona of light. The heat was so intense that Antros could feel it despite the environmental controls of his power armour. All around him, knights were toppling and crumpling in the inferno, their faces melting as they tried to rip off their lava-like helms. Embers whirled through the air, billowing like clouds of fireflies, but all Antros could think of was the splendour of the sorcery. It felt like a beautiful ocean, begging him to dive in and sample the fury of its tides. Just as he felt he could resist no longer, Antros heard Confessor Zin calling his name.

He turned from temptation and looked back towards the gates. All he saw were ranks of the white knights, either blossoming into flames or still firing their bolters into the squads of Tactical Marines.

He wrenched himself away from the draw of the invocation and barged through the crowds of burning warriors. Some of the knights lashed out at him as he passed, roaring in pain and fury as they sliced their falchions towards his face, but they were half-dead and he smashed them aside with ease, using his staff as a club.

He reached the monastery gates and left the crush behind, staggering into

an open space. With a flood of relief, he saw Zin, helping Prester Brennus across the chalky road.

He slowed his pace, removed his helmet and drew a breath to call them back. It was only then that he saw the man striding towards them. It was Pieter Zorambus, or at least one Pieter Zorambus. This particular Unbegotten Prince was badly wounded – one of his legs had been warped out of all recognition by the heat. But his broad grin gleamed in the moonlight as he raised his sword and closed in on his slow-moving prey.

There was no way Antros could reach the priests before Zorambus got to them. The Exhortation of Hollow Fire was still echoing through his thoughts and the archaic language rumbled up through his throat, dark and violent, refusing to be suppressed any longer. Feelings of hatred and bloodlust enveloped him, and as his staff erupted into crimson flames the world was engulfed by a red haze.

Several feet away, at the edge of the road, Pieter Zorambus staggered to a halt as the flames shrouded his body.

Brennus and Zin cried out in alarm, noticing Zorambus for the first time as he lurched towards them wreathed in fire. The flames were not enough to stop him and as he reached Zin, Zorambus hacked down at him with his sword.

Zin's portly frame clearly belied his strength. He managed to dodge the warrior's blow and then barrelled into him, head down. The warrior's crippled leg collapsed beneath him and he toppled backwards onto the road.

Pieter Zorambus was howling as the fire poured from his eyes and mouth, but his flesh was unmarred and he was able to stand, draw back his sword and prepare to strike again.

Rage exploded in Antros' mind and he intoned the curse again, roaring it this time. The night turned white and he staggered under the violence of the magic. Divinus Prime faded from view, replaced by a liquid vortex of shapes and colours. Power tore through the fibres of his flesh, swelling and multiplying until he felt godlike and ephemeral – a spirit of raw energy. Amorphous shapes formed from the aether and swam towards him – undulating bundles of limbs, like anemones rippling across a seabed. They rushed through the whirling colours, their grasping, nebulous limbs straining towards him as they formed and reformed. The sinewy flesh

boiled and inverted, spawning hideous faces. Leering, hysterical grins popped into existence, crammed with rows of needle-teeth and surrounded by lidless, misshapen eyes.

Antros looked around for a way back to Divinus Prime but all he could see was the tide of daemons. He scoured his memory, visualising his copy of *The Glutted Scythe*, recalling the Exhortation of Hollow Fire and wondering what he had forgotten. Why had he been cut loose? He had untethered himself from the materium. He felt himself fading into the maelstrom of power, losing his sense of self and form. He visualised his armoured body, picturing the details with all the clarity he could muster and, to his relief, he saw his physical shape reappear beneath him – his blue battleplate reflecting the lunatic whirlpool of colours that surrounded him. He summoned his staff back into being just before the first of the daemons reached him and he smashed it into the creature's grotesque face. The daemon somersaulted away into the tumult, laughing all the harder, but dozens more were almost on him – a tsunami of rippling limbs and tentacles, like one great mass of daemon flesh.

Antros scoured the pages of his imaginary copy of *The Glutted Scythe*, attempting to find an invocation that could save him from this avalanche of horrors. To his frustration, the words of the book smeared and ran, as though washed away by a chemical rain, leaving colourful streaks where there should have been a facsimile of Mephiston's precise script.

More of the daemons reached him and Antros could do nothing but use his staff as a club, smashing the bubbling mass of limbs away with furious blows as despair threatened to overcome him.

To his surprise, his blows seemed to have a powerful effect on his attackers – they screamed in frustration as blue fire engulfed them, just like it had swallowed the white knights in the abbey. Antros fought harder, but then he noticed that even the daemons that were nowhere near his blows were exploding into balls of blue light. The light grew brighter until he struggled to see what was happening. Suddenly he was falling, as though gravity had noticed his escape and called him to account. As he fell, Antros saw the true cause of the fire: Mephiston. The Chief Librarian had entered his mind and was carving a path through the horrors, hacking and slashing with his flame-bright sword and spreading a great elliptical wall of blue flame through the scrabbling, gibbering daemons.

Antros continued to fall and a funnel of blue fire formed around him. Then he hit the ground with a painful crunch.

The flames and colours were gone and Antros found himself back on the bone-white road.

Zin and Brennus were standing a few feet away, staring at him in horror. There was a small fire smouldering next to them – the warped, scorched remains of Zorambus.

Antros sat up and felt something brittle tumble over his face. He reached up and caught the stinking, ash-like remnants of his own hair. He looked at his armour and saw that it was scorched and blackened. Trails of smoke drifted up from his gauntlets as though he had been gripping hot coals.

He looked around for Mephiston, but saw no sign of him. The battle was still raging in the abbey and the ruins were bathed in mystical light, giving the petrified bones a silvery, lunar quality.

'Are you hurt?' asked Zin, summoning the courage to approach him.

Antros climbed to his feet and dusted the ash from his armour. He ran his hand over his head, feeling nothing but hot stubble where there had previously been thick locks of hair.

He shook his head and examined his face for injuries, finding nothing. 'I am unharmed,' he said, looking at the charred remnants of Pieter Zorambus.

'You became holy fire,' breathed Confessor Zin, hurrying forwards, his bulbous features quivering with excitement. 'The light of the God-Emperor shone through you and struck down that…' he sneered at the burned remains, 'that filthy heretic.'

'The flames were consuming you,' whispered Prester Brennus, his voice trembling.

Antros shook his head again, his thoughts still clouded with images of daemons. 'I had no choice,' he said looking out into the moonlight, half expecting to see more of the unformed things bubbling from the shadows. There was nothing but the eagle cages lining the road and the ghostly shapes of the Penitent Trees, looming over the valley, but he sensed he had crossed some invisible boundary, linking his soul to the things he had seen.

Zin looked past him at the carnage visible through the broken gates. Bursts of flame lit up the violence, revealing brutal snapshots of the knights' agonised screams. The fury of the fires was dying down and the

sound of screams was fading too. The battle was ending already and Antros gestured for Zin to follow him as he lifted Prester Brennus to his feet and started to lead them back towards the gates.

By the time they stepped back into the abbey, the fight was over. White-armoured corpses littered the ground, warped into abstraction by the incredible heat that had destroyed them. Embers and fumes billowed across the courtyard as the Tactical Marines picked through the bodies, recovering their weapons but showing the sense not to fire them again. Whenever they found a knight who was still alive they summoned a Librarian to silence him.

Rhacelus looked up as Antros led the priests through the carnage towards him. The equerry was unmarked and wore his usual expression of mild distaste as he saw the scorch marks on Antros' battleplate and the charcoal smear that had once been his hair.

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow and leant on his force sword. 'What happened to you?'

Antros grimaced. 'My lord,' he said, 'I had no option.'

Rhacelus frowned. 'No option?'

Mephiston strode through the fumes, his robes trailing smoke and sparks. His expression was cool but in his eyes Antros saw a glimpse of the fury that had overcome him on Thermia.

'Lexicanium Antros is more widely read than we thought,' said the Chief Librarian, lowering his still-smouldering sword as he reached them.

'Forgive me, my lord,' said Antros, bowing his head. 'If I had not acted, the priests would have been butchered. I had to–'

'Had to?' interrupted Mephiston. 'Lexicanium, you almost handed your soul to our enemies.'

Antros saw a terrifying glint of anger in the Chief Librarian's cadaverous features. 'And what a generous gift you would have made.' He waved at the priests. 'In saving two souls you could have risked a multitude. Remember what you are, Lexicanium. Remember that you are dangerous.'

Antros pictured the leering daemons he had seen and realised the magnitude of what had nearly happened.

He was about to apologise when Prester Brennus spoke up. His eyes were straining in horror as he took in the gruesome scene that surrounded them. 'We *must* take word to Arch-Cardinal Dravus,' he whispered. 'These…

these things you have killed, they are not Zorambus.'

'No,' agreed Mephiston. 'They were not. The kind of sorcerer who can create such powerful likenesses would not fall so easily.' He looked at the cringing priest. 'But what makes you so sure that he's headed towards Arch-Cardinal Dravus?'

Prester Brennus kept his gaze fixed on the ground as he replied. 'Because Dravus is the planet's last hope. He has summoned everyone still loyal to the Labyrinth – as well as the Children of the Vow, there are whole regiments of Astra Militarum and brothers of the Frateris Militia, all massing behind the walls of Mormotha.' He scratched at his bleeding head and glanced nervously around the mounds of bodies, as though expecting Pieter Zorambus to emerge and strike him down. 'But the Unbegotten Prince has sworn to "enlighten" them with his repulsive creed. He said he will tear down the gates of the Labyrinth.'

Mephiston nodded. 'Then we must be ready to greet him when he arrives. Can you lead us to the Labyrinth?'

The priest still refused to look at Mephiston, but he gave a slow nod.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mormotha, Divinus Prime

They thundered across the plains, trailing a great mountain of dust as they screamed between the Penitent Trees. The priests of Tarn Abbey had left a surprisingly powerful array of vehicles behind and, as dawn turned the bleached landscape into a kaleidoscope of reds and golds, Antros saw their destination rushing towards them out of the heat haze. He was hunched in one of the eagle-prowed skiffs they discovered in the abbey. They were antiques, elaborate constructions of iron and brass that no one had expected to work, but the priests had obviously treated them as holy relics. Their engines had a deep, powerful growl that filled the morning with noise and fumes as they hurled the Blood Angels along, gliding just a few feet above the ground.

Rhacelus was next to him, staring into the dust storm trailing from Mephiston's craft. Behind them, the two priests, Zin and Brennus, were lying on the floor, clutching on to the spars that lined the hull. Captain Vatrenus and some of his Tactical Marines were standing, legs wide as they braced against the lurching motion of the vehicle, their bolters raised and trained on the shapes blurring past.

Mormotha was constructed in the same ossuary fashion as the abbey, but as the rising sun painted it in warm, golden hues, Antros saw that Divinus Prime's capital was built on a much grander scale. The entire city was

contained within a circular curtain wall, hundreds of feet tall and punctuated with gun emplacements and missile batteries. Antros could see the silhouettes of soldiers on the walls carrying banners emblazoned with the sigil of Divinus Prime, a winged sword hilt, and others bearing the symbol of the Adeptus Ministorum.

Unlike Tarn Abbey, Mormotha was perfectly intact. The bleached walls matched the macabre beauty of the Penitent Trees, the curved, bone-construct crenellations reaching up, talon-like, into the clouds.

Broad, paved roads approached the city from several directions and they were all crowded with refugees and weary-looking soldiers. Barely a soul looked up as the skiffs hurtled past them, whipping up clouds of chalk dust. The columns of survivors just trudged on into the morning sun, heads down, carrying a pitiful collection of personal belongings and hauling their wounded on makeshift litters. An army of rickety servitors trundled and lurched through the refugees, carrying broken equipment and the corpses of those who had not survived the journey. It was a miserable scene and Antros started to understand the scale of what had befallen Divinus Prime.

He could see thousands of dispossessed souls stumbling through the barren scrubland, their lines disappearing into the distance. It was one thing to hear the Quorum Empyrric discuss these wars in derisive tones, but quite another to see the consequences. There were families mingled in with priests – normal citizens of the Imperium, just trying to stay alive, hollow-cheeked elders hobbling on bandaged feet, and mothers cradling their febrile infants, all staring at the walls up ahead with the vacant expression of people who could remember nothing but the need to keep walking. Many would never reach their goal – the roads were lined with the corpses of refugees who had died within sight of the capital.

The gates to the city stood open and there were crowds of hooded, white-robed priests waiting to welcome those who staggered inside, offering cups of water and hunks of bread as they helped them into the shade. The air was full of noise and movement as mechanised hymnals fluttered overhead – leather-bound tomes borne through the air on broad, dove-white wings. As they flew they broadcasted the ghostly recordings of long-dead Terran choirs. Singing along tunelessly with the hymns were the relic-sellers who haunted all shrine worlds. Antros saw plump, lavishly

dressed frauds with rubicund faces, cheerfully peddling holy tracts and crudely made reliquaries to wretches who could not afford to feed themselves.

The Blood Angels landed their skiffs outside the gates and stormed through the noisy throng, drawing surprised glances as people saw the towering figures of Mephiston and the other Adeptus Astartes. Mephiston paused as he walked into the centre of a large crossroads. The four roads that met just inside the gates were broad enough to support a whole phalanx of tanks, but they still seemed narrow because of the soaring townhouses and temples that surrounded them. The buildings were constructed in the same funerary style as the Penitent Trees outside: sturdy, fluted columns supporting domed turrets and grand pediments, all intricately wrought from millions of warped, fossilised bones. The city would have looked like a mausoleum if it weren't overrun with thousands of distraught refugees, all talking and yelling at once. The steps of chapels and basilicas swarmed with crowds of bellowing, sunburned survivors, all venting their pent-up grief and anger on the officials who were trying to aid them.

As they passed through the mob, Antros heard the same story repeated over and over: cities and towns that had become slaughterhouses, bloodbath battles as the secessionists known as the Enlightened turned on their brothers, killing those who would not embrace their new doctrine. It sounded to Antros as though many *had* embraced the new cult. He heard refugees mutter of family members and friends who had converted to the new faith. They spoke of them in shocked, desperate tones, calling them apostates.

Antros and the others gathered around Mephiston at the centre of the crossroads, drawing more surprised glances. The Adeptus Astartes looked like an impregnable bastion as crowds of mortals backed away from them, crying out in alarm and calling for guards.

+Even those that know its name will not speak openly of the Blade Petrific,+ said Mephiston inside Antros' head. He saw Rhacelus nod in reply and wondered if he was meant to have heard the words or not. +It is an article of their faith, discussed only in their most sacred rites.+

Mephiston gave Antros a meaningful glance and he realised he was speaking deliberately to him. He looked again at the crowds, wondering if

he could delve into the mind of a local and find a memory that could lead them to their prize. It was no use. Whatever sorcery had shrouded Divinus Prime was still clouding his second sight. Even the attempt caused him to wince as he saw a shattered reflection of his own thoughts – ideas and hopes dredged from the recesses of his memory. The harder he tried to explore the minds of others, the more he felt as though his own mind were being examined. The sensation was deeply unpleasant. He was about to ask Rhacelus if *he* was still blind but the commotion caused by their arrival had drawn the attention of one of the beleaguered officials.

'Hello?' called the man, barging through a scrum of arguing merchants and reaching Mephiston.

He was full of bluster, and seemed about to demand something of them, but the colour drained from his face and he stumbled to a halt. He looked from Mephiston's corpse-like features to Rhacelus' imperious glare and then Antros' inhuman beauty, and shook his head, opening and closing his mouth a few times, forgetting whatever he had been intending to say.

Prester Brennus stepped from behind the Blood Angels and the man visibly relaxed as he saw someone of more normal proportions.

'Brothers,' he said, as Confessor Zin also stepped out of the crowd. 'Welcome to Mormotha. I'm Prester Cyriak. Where have you travelled from?' He glanced nervously at the Blood Angels, noticing Captain Vatrenus and his men striding through the crowds to join them. 'And who are your companions?'

Prester Brennus stumbled forwards and grabbed his hands. 'Tarn Abbey is gone!' he cried. 'The Enlightened crucified anyone who would not join them! They're coming here next! The apostates will tear down these walls and butcher–'

'Calm yourself, brother,' replied Prester Cyriak. He embraced Brennus. 'Word has reached us of the murders at Tarn Abbey, but you need fear no more.' He waved at the crowds. 'Arch-Cardinal Dravus has summoned everyone still following the *true* Imperial Creed. Three whole regiments of Volscan Dragoons have turned their back on the apostasy of their brothers and travelled here to fight for the arch-cardinal. And more loyal soldiers are arriving every day.' His eyes flashed with pride. 'There are thousands of militiamen here too. Zorambus is coming to meet his doom, brother. These atrocities will soon be over and once the arch-cardinal has dealt

with that wretched fraud, he intends to perform an even greater miracle. He means to return us to the arms of the Emperor.'

'What do you mean, brother?' asked Confessor Zin.

Prester Cyriak was struggling to contain his excitement, but he managed to keep his voice low. 'The arch-cardinal has spent many days praying in the wilderness after the Emperor blessed him with a vision. Dravus is seeking a way to break this unholy silence that has enveloped us. He seeks a way to return us to the light of the Imperium.'

Zin glanced triumphantly at Mephiston. 'Do you see? Do you see what you have done, my lord? Your mere presence on this world has broken the curse. This can be no coincidence. It is as it was prophesised!'

Prester Brennus slumped in Cyriak's arms, overcome with exhaustion and emotion. 'Forgive me, brother,' said Cyriak, looking pained at the man's suffering. 'I must get you to the infirmary.'

He summoned some of his fellow priests over and ordered them to find treatment for the man. Confessor Zin muttered a quick prayer over the barely conscious Brennus and promised to visit him as soon as he was able.

'Take us to the arch-cardinal,' said Rhacelus, once Brennus was gone.

Cyriak grimaced and looked to Zin for support. 'Brother, as you can imagine, even if it were within my power, I could not simply admit strangers to the arch-cardinal's presence. I'm sure your companions pose no danger but I would need some kind of–'

Rhacelus stepped forwards, his beautiful, master-crafted armour glinting in the sunlight. His hulking frame threw Cyriak into shadow and the man looked up at him in terror. 'We are the sons of Sanguinius,' said Rhacelus, clearly nauseated at having to address so lowly a specimen. 'And I assure you that we *do* pose a threat.' He flicked back his cloak and rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. 'Question the will of a Blood Angel again and you will meet the Emperor sooner than you expected.'

Cyriak backed away with a horrified grimace, his hands raised protectively. He shook his head and was about to flee when Zin interceded.

'Prester Cyriak,' said Zin, stepping between Rhacelus and the priest. 'If you can inform the arch-cardinal that I am here, and that I am in the company of Lord Mephiston, Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels, he will be all too pleased to see us, I assure you.'

‘But he’s not here!’ said Cyriak. ‘He travelled alone to the Arazi Plains. As I said, it has been prophesised that he will receive guidance from the God-Emperor.’

Zin pressed Cyriak further. ‘Brother, where exactly in the Arazi Plains? We must speak to him urgently. Lord Mephiston cannot be left waiting. You must send word to–’

‘We will wait,’ said Mephiston, studying the crowds of refugees that were staring at them.

As Antros looked at Mephiston he noticed that his left arm was shaking and the armour was hazed by a cloud of black sparks. Mephiston followed his gaze and gripped the vambrace. He muttered under his breath until the sparks were extinguished, but his arm continued to tremble.

‘*Wait*, my lord?’ said Antros.

Mephiston nodded. ‘Take us to Father Orsuf.’

Cyriak looked at Mephiston’s arm, his eyes widening in fear, and he seemed unable to reply.

‘Orsuf is alive?’ asked Rhacelus, glancing at Mephiston.

‘Do you know a Father Orsuf?’ asked Zin, looking confused but trying to give Cyriak a reassuring smile. He nodded at the growing crowd that was forming around them. ‘It might be better if we were out of your way.’

Cyriak nodded eagerly, clearly delighted by the prospect of making the Blood Angels someone else’s responsibility. ‘Yes, of course. Of course. And I do know Father Orsuf. The old preacher. But he rarely receives guests. Is there anyone else? I’m sure someone…’ His words trailed off and he flushed red.

‘He will receive me,’ said Mephiston.

Cyriak nodded and started barging a path through the crowds, waving for them to follow. ‘Please forgive me for…’ He grimaced.

‘No need to apologise, brother,’ said Zin, as he and the Blood Angels followed the awkward-looking priest off the main thoroughfare. He led them away from the gates and deeper into the city. Each street they entered was a little less crowded than the last and a little narrower. Antros quickly saw why Mormotha was known as the Labyrinth. Each concentric circle of the city was crowded with grand, ecclesiastical buildings: basilicas, mausoleums and tombs, all striving to outdo each other’s macabre beauty. Their porticoed facades flooded the avenues and fountains below with

confusing pools of shadow, so that Antros soon found it impossible to keep track of their route. Navigation was made even harder by the fact that every architectural detail was built of the same, sinuous bone-work.

As the shadows grew deeper, the shapes started to look more sinister: twisted, knotted spines, warped into balustrades and pediments, all studded with grinning skulls. The air was still crowded with winged hymnals that filled the streets with their eerie, distorted music, but they soon reached a district that was free of the wailing refugees. Hooded faces looked down at them from high, colonnaded balconies. They eyed the giants below them with blank, unreadable expressions.

Cyriak led them on through a series of empty gardens and up a steep, cobbled street towards an abbey, perched at the summit of a hill that looked down over the whole of Mormotha. They had been walking for nearly an hour by now and, as they neared the imposing, domed building, Antros paused to look back. Seeing the city from this vantage point revealed that the capital was even larger than he had imagined. Mormotha's bone-white maze of streets sprawled out for many miles, and Antros realised there must be millions of people inhabiting its crush of temples and monasteries.

To the east, he saw the great gates and the square they had entered through, still clogged with crowds. To the south was a palace complex – a huddle of buildings that dwarfed even the massive structures surrounding it. The palace buildings were linked by dozens of covered pergolas, giving the impression of a vast spiderweb, and even from several miles away Antros could hear bells ringing in its towers.

The north side of the city faced out onto a sun-burnished expanse of ocean. The calm, glittering waters were dotted with small ships and beyond the city walls there were docks and warehouses.

The western side of the city was dominated by a space port so huge Antros could make it out even at this distance, and near the space port was a colossal amphitheatre that looked to be at least a mile wide. This vast, terraced circle was surrounded by a legion of crumbling statues that looked down over the surrounding buildings with regal indifference. Everywhere he looked Antros saw grandeur and magnificence, but he sensed a void at the heart of Mormotha. Most of the plazas and markets stood empty and the few people who were on the streets hurried through

its grand arches in silence, their heads down. The city felt like a memory, as lifeless and fossilised as the bones that had built it.

As they neared the abbey, its tall, panelled doors swung open and a stern-faced preacher emerged to greet them. He limped out from beneath the abbey's arched porch and grimaced as he stepped into the light. He was thickset and burly but he moved with the studied slowness of the extremely old, leaning heavily on a staff. His spine was so twisted by battle-trauma that he had to tilt his head on one side to look up at the Blood Angels. His head was shaven and his face was covered in a network of old, silvery scars, surrounding a nose that had been broken so many times it looked like an S. He looked more like a crippled old street fighter than a priest and his ecclesiastical robes seemed oddly incongruous. Where his left eye should have been there was a large augmetic lens, fixed in a housing of battered iron. It turned slowly in its angry socket as he tried to focus it on Mephiston.

'By the Throne,' he said, smiling. 'Lord Mephiston?'

Mephiston surprised Antros by speaking directly to the abbot, addressing him in respectful, almost warm tones. 'Father Orsuf,' he said. 'I heard a malicious rumour that you had retired.'

Orsuf scowled with embarrassment and tried to straighten his spine so he could offer Mephiston a salute. 'My chainsword is still oiled and ready, Lord Mephiston, hanging on the wall of my study. It would be an honour to join you in battle once more. An honour! It has been too long since we fought together.'

Mephiston gripped the old man's shoulder. 'I am joking, Adamis. You served the Emperor more fiercely than any preacher I ever saw. It can be no coincidence that you have been granted a few twilight years in which to reflect. You have earned a rest.'

Orsuf shook his head furiously. 'I have no use for rest, Lord Mephiston. Let me get my weapons.'

He was about to limp away but Mephiston held him back.

'I need your mind, Adamis, not your weapons. I need to know more about your home. I have come here on an urgent mission but Divinus Prime is a mystery to me. I must learn the history of Mormotha and its construction. From what I have read, you have become this city's leading scholar, and you were always a man of great insight.'

The old preacher looked pleasantly baffled by Mephiston's praise, but he smiled again. 'It does my old bones good to see you.' He shrugged. 'And I am something of a historical relic, I suppose, so perhaps I can assist you.' He waved at the building behind him. 'The Tomb of the Eremite is one of the oldest structures in the city and our library contains some of the earliest records.'

Mephiston's face remained as impassive as ever, but Antros could sense his pleasure at the old man's reply.

Father Orsuf shrugged, laughing quietly to himself. 'Strange days, strange days.' He shuffled back up the steps towards the porch and waved for them to follow. 'All are welcome at the Tomb of the Eremite.'

He led them slowly through a series of candlelit chapels and into a large refectorium. The long, spartan room was mostly empty, with just a few monks sat eating in silence from wooden bowls. Then he paused and looked at Mephiston, unsure what to do next.

Mephiston ordered Captain Vatrenus and his Tactical Marines to explore the city, acquaint themselves with its layout and report back to him in the morning. Then he turned to Epistolary Rhacelus. 'Lexicanium Antros will be required to do more than observe in the days to come,' he said. 'We must accelerate his training.'

Antros struggled not to grin but Rhacelus looked appalled by the idea. 'My lord, is that wise?'

Antros could see the anger pouring out of him and it was not hard to guess the reason. Rhacelus had been there in the Chemic Spheres. He heard Mephiston claim that Antros might bring about his doom. Rhacelus clearly did not trust him.

'Make him ready,' said Mephiston. 'He must master the rites listed in *The Glutted Scythe* before the return of the arch-cardinal. You saw how much use bolter fire was. It will fall to the three of us to rid these people of heresy.'

Rhacelus glared at Antros but said no more.

Zin spoke up. 'Forgive me, my lord, but I would like to see if I can find more news of the arch-cardinal. I am most keen to speak with him. Perhaps he is already on his way back to the city?' he said, looking at Cyriak.

Cyriak nodded. 'It's possible. At the very least we could ask if he has

been seen by any of the new arrivals.' With that, Zin made the sign of the aquila to Mephiston and the two priests hurried away.

Mephiston left the hall with Father Orsuf and Antros was left facing Epistolary Rhacelus.

Rhacelus flared his nostrils with displeasure, as though considering a stain on his armour. Then he looked at the courtyard outside the refectorium. 'Follow me, then,' he said and they headed out into the morning sun.

The square courtyard was surrounded by cloistered walkways but there was no sign of any priests loitering in the shadows. At the centre of the courtyard, surrounded by faded mosaics, was a large tomb. It was a wicker-like mesh of femurs and ribs and, like the rest of the surrounding architecture, the thing was beautifully made, the interlocking fossils woven into an intricate design that incorporated haloed saints and writhing nests of serpents.

Rhacelus walked on and indicated that Antros should sit on the mosaic floor.

Antros did as instructed but Rhacelus remained standing and drew his force sword. Antros could not entirely hide his surprise as Rhacelus rested the blade on the back of his neck, but he refused to flinch from the touch of the metal.

'We should be on Baal,' said Rhacelus, looking scornfully at the dusty courtyard that surrounded them. 'This is no place for me to teach you anything. We should be in the Chamber of the Ensanguined, at the heart of the Fifteenth Basilica, surrounded by all the wisdom of our forbears. But I'm afraid you will have to imagine such glories, neophyte. If the Chief Librarian wishes me to teach you the imprecations of *The Glutted Scythe*, I must see whether your mind is ready for the next stage of its development. Rest assured, should you prove unworthy, my blade will spare you any shame.'

'My lord,' said Antros, 'I am ready. Whatever the–'

'Then seek the fathomless path,' whispered Rhacelus.

Antros' words faltered as he tried to understand what those words might mean. Then he realised he could not remember who had said them. He looked around in confusion, remembering that he was alone. The Carrion Sea stretched out as far as he could see in every direction: fierce, ember

tides, hissing and steaming as they belched plumes of smoke up to the blood-red sky. The deserts of Baal Secundus were uniformly infernal, but the Carrion Sea had a particularly fearsome reputation. Antros looked down at his patched-together rad-suit and saw that it was beginning to shrivel and crack. What had possessed him to attempt this crossing? Then he remembered. The brutal, featureless landscape was broken by only one thing. The growling hulk of his sand roamer. It looked like a wounded beast, hovering in the rippling heat and spitting oil across the ash. 'Ramiel,' he grunted. 'I *will* kill you for this.'

Antros staggered on through the thick, energy-sapping atmosphere and the shocking heat, ignoring the pain as his suit started to melt into his skin. His rebreather filtered out the worst of the fumes but he still felt like he was breathing molten metal. The air burned in his lungs until he could hardly bear to take another breath but still he lurched on. As he neared the sand roamer he saw Ramiel, struggling with the engine, attempting to wrench a part free before the fuel caught fire and took his face off.

'Ampelos!' cried Ramiel, staggering back from the truck, a broken axel in his fist. 'I told you we'd make it!'

Antros frowned. Of course his name was Ampelos. Where had he heard the name Antros?

By the standards of the Blood tribes, Ramiel was a giant – thickset and over six foot tall, with none of the wasted, stooping posture that marked out most of the tribesmen. 'Get your arse up here, Ampelos!' he cried, climbing up into the driver's seat.

Ampelos clambered over the top of an ash dune and tumbled down the other side. His tumble became a roll and tongues of fire flashed in the folds of his thick, rubber suit. When he came to a halt at the bottom of the slope he howled in annoyance and pain.

'What made me ever listen to anything you have ever said, ever?'

'Because I always talk sense,' grinned Ramiel as Ampelos climbed up beside him in the truck. 'And you know that once we've joined the tribe of the Angels you will thank me every day for getting us there.'

Ampelos replied with a kidney punch that only succeeded in knocking more laughter from his brother.

'We're almost there!' said Ramiel, his eyes widening behind his mask. 'Angel's Fall! For Throne's sake, think of it, Ramiel. We will *see* them.'

They sat there, both picturing the scene. From their earliest childhood they had whispered tales of crimson angels. Giants who strode the deserts. Armoured colossi, unaffected by radiation, afraid of nothing and no one. Heroes who waged war across the stars, crushing every tribe that defied them.

'And when we complete the trials they will take us to the Arx Angelicum,' breathed Ramiel, his voice rough with emotion. 'They will make Angels of us.'

From anyone else, Ampelos would have found this absurd, but he actually believed Ramiel might get them to the mythical fortress of the Blood Angels. While still a youth, Ramiel had butchered all his rivals and become the new Anxur Anuath of the Cruor tribe. He was still in his teens and his reputation was so fearsome that not one of the other Blood tribes had raided their territories for nearly a year. Even the most stubborn elders of the Cruor tribe had bent the knee.

'I think they just might,' said Ampelos in a quieter voice, buoyed by his brother's determination. 'We're going to do it, Ramiel.'

They both looked forwards, through the filthy windscreen. There was a deep fissure before them, perhaps only twenty or thirty feet wide, but so deep that they could not see the bottom. Ampelos looked in either direction and could see no end to the crevasse.

He was about to say something, to make one last plea for sense, when Ramiel gunned the engines and they hurtled forwards. They both slammed back in their seats as the sand roamer raced towards the chasm, its six wheels trailing fumes and dust.

Ramiel steered the truck towards a natural ramp – a sloping lip of rock that jutted out over the drop. The wind howled through the truck as they sliced through the fumes and out across the void.

They seemed to hang above the abyss. Ampelos felt all the seconds of his life collide. He knew that this jump was the fulcrum of everything that had been and everything that would come. Then, in that fractured moment, he saw the future. As in so many of his life's crucial moments he saw, vividly, what lay ahead: only one of them was going to be an Angel.

They were two-thirds of the way across when the undercarriage tore free.

The sand roamer kicked to one side and then turned, end over end, in a slow, graceful tumble.

When they came down on the other side it was with a terrible grinding of tearing metal plates and escaping gas.

A cold slap of agony exploded in Ampelos' face and, for a few seconds, he knew nothing.

Then he drew a flame-hot breath and howled in pain. He was lying a few feet away from the vehicle, his mask smeared with blood and his nose pulsing with furious pain.

He looked around and saw the truck on its side. 'Ramiel!' he cried. Smoke was drifting around the base of the vehicle. Ramiel had broken one of his legs free but he could not lift the other from the wreckage. He was trapped. 'Ampelos!' he howled, straining to free himself, his voice hoarse with agony.

Ampelos staggered over to him, swaying and stumbling like a drunk, dazed from the crash.

When he got there, he grabbed Ramiel and hauled with all his strength.

Ramiel gasped in agony and blood jetted from his thigh.

Ampelos paused, horrified.

'Get me out!' cried Ramiel. 'Don't let me burn!' There was no fear in his voice, only fury.

Ampelos pulled again, but only succeeded in spraying more of his brother's blood into the air.

Ramiel's eyes rolled back in his head and he seemed on the verge of passing out. Even through his mask, Ampelos could see that his brother's face was a ghastly white.

Ampelos groaned a curse as he saw flames licking around the fuel tanks.

'You are going to make it,' said Ampelos. 'I will not let you die!'

Ampelos turned and looked into the heat haze. He saw, to his surprise, the figure of a man, standing calmly in the heat of the desert. It was hard to be sure through the fumes, but it looked like a warrior of some kind. Ampelos could not see the stranger clearly, but he had no choice but to approach him. He would not simply stand by and watch Ramiel die.

'I'll be back,' he said, gripping Ramiel's arm, then he rushed towards the stranger.

As he reached the man, the smoke rolled back and revealed such a glorious sight that Ampelos gasped. Standing near the edge of the chasm was an Angel. It was clad in golden armour and had a pair of pure white

wings folded behind its back. The Angel's face was turned to the heavens, as though in prayer, and its beautiful features were bathed in Baal's infernal, bloody light. All the fury of the Carrion Sea had been unable to touch this perfect being. Its polished armour was immaculate, with no sign of corrosion or dirt and the flawless alabaster of its face radiated purity and health.

At the sound of Ampelos' approach, the Angel lowered its gaze and turned to face him. It was carrying a gilt-handled sword and, as it stepped towards him through the drifting embers, Ampelos saw its face more clearly.

His stomach turned and his mouth filled with bile acid. Immediately, Ampelos sensed that something was wrong. The stranger's face was beautiful but out of place. Ampelos could not understand how, but he knew that this figure should not be here. It was as though this moment had happened before, many years earlier, and memory told him that things should be different.

The Angel's face was incredibly beautiful but such utter *wrongness* bled from it that Ampelos was terrified. He could barely summon words. All he managed to cry out was a strangled 'Wait!'

The false Angel smiled. 'You're human?' Its voice was as serene as its eyes were flawless.

'I'm Ampelos,' he gasped, pulling back his rebreather, struggling to breathe. 'Of the Cruor tribe.' His skin blistered immediately and he quickly refastened his hood, but the Angel had seen enough to smile.

'What kind of fool walks through the Carrion Sea?' the Angel asked, good-willed amusement written across its face.

Ampelos groaned in pain, struggling not to flee. He dropped to his knees, overcome by exhaustion and confusion. 'A fool like my brother,' he gasped, waving feebly at the trashed sand roamer behind him. 'I have to free him.'

The false Angel's face was transformed by mock-concern and it held out a hand to help him up. 'Do you?'

Ampelos dared not refuse the hand and as he climbed to his feet he saw the Angel's face close up. It was so clearly untrue that he thought his mind might break. Every atom of his being screamed in horror and revulsion.

'Yes,' muttered Ampelos, talking more to himself than the stranger.

Anger and pain tripped the words from his lips. ‘Of course. We are destined to become Angels.’

The Angel smiled sympathetically. ‘It does not look like your friend would have done very well in the Place of Challenge, Ampelos. You must go to him. The fire has nearly reached those fuel tanks. You must free him. Unless…’ The Angel shrugged. ‘Perhaps you have seen another future?’

Ampelos reeled, filled with guilt. ‘What do you mean?’

The false Angel smiled again as its wings spread out behind it, refulgent and shimmering in the radioactive haze. ‘You have seen the future. You know that only one of you will achieve the glory you seek. You wandered away because you saw that. If your brother dies, you will be that one.’

Ampelos laughed derisively at the suggestion he would leave his brother to die on purpose. Words of refusal and denouncement circled his thoughts, but, as he looked at the Angel, he found he could say nothing. He knew that this moment should be different, that it *had* been different. The Angel should not be here, questioning his motives like this.

‘You are a lie,’ he cried. ‘You are not here.’

Anger flashed in the stranger’s eyes. It was gone as quickly as it came, but it was enough to trigger something in Ampelos.

The rage he had seen in the Angel’s eyes reminded him of something. The idea grew in his mind. Suddenly it seemed crucial that he remember what the stranger’s fury reminded him of.

The false Angel saw his hesitation and the flash of anger returned.

Ampelos frowned and a word formed, unbidden, on his lips. ‘Rhacelus?’ With the word came a flood of images.

The Angel reared away with a frustrated howl, swallowed by a vortex of scenes that exploded from the air and Antros recalled his true name again – his Blood Angels name. Sensing he had achieved a victory of some kind, Antros dived after the Angel.

As the Angel tumbled through a maelstrom of places and people, its golden armour dissolved into currents of colour, washing up into Antros’ face, blinding him as he swam in the Angel’s wake, calling out the name Rhacelus with increasing conviction. As the shapes gyrated around him, Antros saw Rhacelus appear ahead of him, stripped of his disguise as he plunged through the storm of light and pigment.

Antros powered through the tumult after him, grasped Rhacelus’ ankle

and hauled him towards the brightest of the lights, driven by some unexplained instinct.

They were back in the courtyard outside the refectorium. Everything was as it had been when Antros sat down. Rhacelus was still clutching his force sword and the blade was sparking with empyrric fury. Antros thought that Rhacelus was about to strike and he stood up, backing away from him.

Rhacelus stared at him, his eyes still blazing blue. Then he closed his eyes and lowered the sword, letting it clatter onto the stone tiles. He remained like that, eyes closed, his face a mask of concentration, until Antros spoke.

'My lord?' Antros said. 'Have I passed?'

'You let your brother die?'

Antros' worst fears were confirmed – the false Angel that had transposed itself onto his memory was Rhacelus. The old veteran had pried into Antros' past and seen Ramiel's death.

'No,' he insisted. 'I was looking for help. I only left him for a moment.'

'But then you hesitated?' Rhacelus watched him closely.

Antros looked away. 'Perhaps, for the briefest moment. But nothing I could have done would have saved him.'

Rhacelus shrugged. 'It does not matter to me, Antros, but I see it matters to you. You carry a great guilt – and guilt could cloud your judgement.' He leant closer. 'I have seen the hunger in you – the ambition to succeed. And now I know what feeds it. You are determined to prove yourself. You want to prove that your brother's death was fated, rather than being your fault. Isn't that true?'

Antros said nothing and continued staring at the ground.

Rhacelus nodded. 'I saw this shadow over you and thought it was something worse. We can complete your training, Antros, but know that I will be watching you, always. I *know* you now.'

Antros nodded. He did not doubt that for a second.

'Is there anything else I should know?' asked Rhacelus, looking closely at Antros.

Something about the exchange prompted Antros to speak more openly than he would usually dare. 'What do you know of Mephiston's "Gift"? Of its origins, I mean. Have you ever asked him what he *really* saw on Hades Hive? What kept him from dying beneath the rubble that day?'

Suspicion and anger crossed Rhacelus' face. Then he sighed and nodded, adopting a more neutral expression. 'A reasonable question. Calistarius survived that day, and was reborn as Mephiston, because Sanguinius saw his most promising son dying and refused to let him go. He saw hope in Calistarius. He saw a soul so like his own that it could wield the power of a primarch.' He looked up at the sky. 'Mephiston's Gift is the might of the Angel.'

'How do you know all this?'

'I know it because I *believe* it. My faith in Mephiston is complete. I would follow him into any hell he chose without a moment's pause.' He leant close to Antros, his sapphire eyes flashing. 'He will save us all.'

Rhacelus spoke with such passion that Antros felt ashamed for ever doubting the Chief Librarian, and he nodded, humbled by the fire in Rhacelus' voice.

Rhacelus waited to see if Antros would push the matter any further. Then he lifted up a gold-edged, porphyry box that was chained to his battleplate. Using a gold key, also chained to his power armour, he unlocked the box and slid out a small, leather-bound book.

'Read with me, Lexicanium,' he said, addressing Antros by his correct rank for the first time. 'And for Throne's sake concentrate. There are very few words in this book, but you could read it for a century and not catch its true meaning.' He gave Antros a warning glare. 'Whatever drives you, there are no shortcuts to *true* knowledge. This text rewards hard work and dedicated study. If the Emperor is willing and you can forget your dead brother for a while, we will find out how great your talent really is.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mormotha, Divinus Prime

In the next three days, Antros lived through a dozen different lifetimes. Under the stern tutelage of Rhacelus, he memorised and recited each of the invocations recorded in *The Glutted Scythe.* They sat motionless in the courtyard, oblivious to the rising and falling of the sun, neither drinking nor eating as they worked slowly through the text. Priests would occasionally wander past them, paying tribute to the Tomb of the Eremite or hurrying to prayers, but if they paused to look at the Librarians, all they saw were two colossal warriors hunched over a small book. The dangerous, warp-fuelled rites being enacted all took place behind the eyes of the two Blood Angels. Rhacelus weaved entire warzones inside Antros' mind, plunging him into the endless battles he had fought during his centuries as a Blood Angel. At the crucial moment of each conflict he ordered Antros to join him in whichever evocation he had employed to defeat the enemy. Each time Antros faltered, Rhacelus firmly intoned the words again, leading him through the rituals as enemies erupted into flames or collapsed, screaming, into fragments of dimensionless agony.

As he grappled with each of Mephiston's dark sacraments, Antros felt his grasp of the galaxy expanding and deepening, so that, by the time they were finally interrupted, he felt as though he had been reborn. All the ambition and fervour that had brought him to this point seemed like the

naive enthusiasm of a child; he was no less determined, but he now understood the hazardous journey he was beginning. Damnation and glory were a thought's-breadth away from each other.

On the third morning of their time in the courtyard, Antros and Rhacelus were drawn from their visions by a harsh clanging of cymbals and tuneless bells.

Antros gradually focused on the scene, shaking his head free of a dozen realities as he rose to his feet, moving with the awkward hesitance of a somnambulist. He reached out to grasp a pillar as he tried to reacquaint his senses with the material world. After all he had seen and done at Rhacelus' side, it seemed odd to recall that they had only just arrived at the abbey. The courtyard had been transformed during their absence. As his vision cleared, he saw that it was now crowded with a mixture of monks and heavily armed militiamen and preachers – religious zealots, wearing straps of ammunition and psychotic stares. The air rang with impassioned prayers and catechisms as they crowded around the tomb at the centre of the courtyard.

As Antros stumbled out of the cloistered shadows, the preachers nearest to him faltered, staring in shock, but the flood of priests attempting to reach the tomb soon pushed them forwards. They had adorned the whole courtyard with scraps of parchment and there was a celebratory air to the gathering.

'What's happening?' demanded Antros, halting one of the militiamen.

Behind him, Rhacelus had also risen from the stone pew and the militiaman looked up at them both wide-eyed, taking in their weapons and huge suits of power armour.

'Arch-Cardinal Dravus,' he said. 'We're giving thanks for his safe return.' Despite his obvious fear of the Blood Angels, the priest stared at them ecstatically. 'He's survived his trials in the wilderness. He has returned to us with a message from the God-Emperor. He knows how we can end this war and reunite the Children of the Vow!'

Antros glanced at Rhacelus then looked at the priest again. 'Where is he now? In the city?'

The crowd carried the man away from them, but he simply laughed. 'Follow the processions!'

'We must find the Chief Librarian,' said Antros, turning back to

Rhacelus.

'He will already know of this,' replied Rhacelus. Warpfire was still sparking in his eyes, a remnant of their recent journeys. 'Captain Vatrenus,' he said, talking into his vox. 'Where are you?'

There was a brief crackle of interference, then the captain's strident voice broke through the white noise. '*...minutes away from the amphitheatre. The Chief Librarian spoke to me an hour ago and ordered me to set watch over both of the entrances, but it's hard to get near the place, never mind locate the gates. We have moved off the street. Need to let the crowd come past. Half the planet must be here. So many bloody refugees came through the gates yesterday. The idiots are crushing each other. The word is that Dravus has finally returned. They're all heading for the amphitheatre to hear him give some kind of sermon.*' There was a pause and when the captain spoke again, Antros could hear wariness in his voice. '*Have you completed your studies? I checked on you yesterday morning. Tried talking to you. You wouldn't answer. Even when I spoke your names.*'

Rhacelus looked at Antros. His expression was an odd mixture of suspicion and pride. 'We have finished our work.'

'Is the Chief Librarian at the amphitheatre?' Rhacelus asked Captain Vatrenus over the vox.

'*No. He is with you. Or, at least, he* should *be with you. He has not left the abbey since we arrived. He went into the library with that old preacher three days ago and never came out. I tried to vox him but had no luck. He contacted me this morning about the amphitheatre gates but he has been silent since then.*' He sounded irritated. '*And he wants us to find an old sluice gate or some such thing, but I am sure we could be more use with you.*'

Rhacelus nodded. 'Find those gates, Captain Vatrenus. The Chief Librarian does not give orders on a whim. Use force if you need to. We will find Lord Mephiston now and join you as soon as we can.'

'*Epistolary,*' said Vatrenus. '*This blade Mephiston seeks – is it here? Is it in Mormotha? In this amphitheatre?*' He sounded frustrated by his lack of clarity. '*Could I be looking for it rather than hunting for gates and drains? The Chief Librarian never said where we would find the thing. Will this Arch-Cardinal Dravus have it?*'

Rhacelus shook his head. 'I do not know, but Dravus is the most senior

priest on Divinus Prime. He will know where their relics are stored. I presume the Chief Librarian will demand that Dravus hand the thing over or direct him to whatever reliquary houses it.'

There was a silence across the vox-network and Antros could feel the captain's doubt. '*Will he do that?*'

'Would *you* refuse the Chief Librarian?'

'*No, Epistolary Rhacelus, I would not, but I do not have a planet's worth of faith-drunk zealots roaring my name.*'

'We will be with you soon, captain. Reach those gates,' said Rhacelus, terminating the conversation.

Rhacelus frowned, considering the captain's words. Then he led Antros through the courtyard and back into the refectorium. Several of the tables had been overturned and the dusty silence that had greeted the Blood Angels had vanished, replaced by a raucous, manic din. Rhacelus curled his lip in distaste at the priests and militiamen scrambling through the room, howling prayers. 'Savages,' he muttered. 'And *this* is what we are sworn to protect.'

Antros was about to defend the men when he noticed how deranged they looked. His words stalled in his mouth. The Space Marines marched easily against the flow of devotees and shoved open the double doors that the abbot had led Mephiston through on the day of their arrival. They were met by a set of broad, sweeping steps and were about to ascend when Mephiston emerged at the top, followed by Father Orsuf. The abbot paused at the top of the steps and Mephiston placed a hand on the old preacher's shoulder in an uncharacteristic show of affection.

'To have accumulated so much knowledge in a single lifetime is a rare achievement, Father Orsuf,' said Mephiston. 'You are wise beyond your years.'

The abbot shook his head, embarrassed by the praise. 'I am unable to rid my mind of obscure facts, Chief Librarian, that is all. Most of it is clutter that I would rather be rid of, but I am glad to have helped you. I would rather help you on the battlefield, though. Perhaps I still could? I can still–' He was about to say more when he saw the Blood Angels waiting at the bottom of the steps. He laughed. 'And there they are, just as you said.'

Mephiston did not acknowledge his battle-brothers and continued to grip the abbot by the shoulder. 'You have helped me enough. Stay with your

books today, Father Orsuf.'

The fire faded from the abbot's eye and he nodded, smiling sadly. 'I understand.' He gave Mephiston an awkward bow. 'Good luck, old friend. Perhaps we will meet again.' Then he headed back into his library, laughing to himself. 'Wise beyond my years!'

Mephiston swept down the steps, his cloak billowing behind him and his gaze even more intense than usual.

'I know what we must do,' he said, reaching Rhacelus.

Rhacelus gripped his arm. 'You know where the blade is?'

Mephiston shook his head. 'But the abbot has shared more than I could have expected. He is brave to break with the traditions that surround him, but he is a man of rare insight. He understands the mistakes that have been made here. I will explain as we travel to the amphitheatre.' He handed a book to Antros and walked on. 'We do not have long,' he said as he led them back through the abbey. 'And there is much to be done before we meet the arch-cardinal. Have you heard from Vatrenus?'

'Yes,' said Rhacelus. 'They are heading for the gates to the amphitheatre, as you ordered. And looking for some kind of sluice gate?'

Mephiston nodded. 'Good. That building is ancient even by the standards of this city. Its secrets are warded by sorcery that I do not understand. I will need Vatrenus to use simple brawn.'

Antros could see the distant terraces of the amphitheatre as their armoured boots clattered over the cobbles. As they descended from the hilltop, they began to encounter large groups of excited priests and gangs of battle-weary soldiers, their hollow-cheeked faces reinvigorated by the droning prayers broadcast by the hymnals overhead.

Antros noticed that many of the people they passed were holding something in their fists, something that glittered and flashed as they rushed through the patches of morning light between walkways and bridges. Eventually, one of the zealots came close enough that he saw what it was: a bladeless, silver sword handle.

'The Blade Petrific is the cornerstone of their faith,' said Mephiston, sensing Antros' unspoken question. 'To speak its name is forbidden. They rarely make such open demonstrations of their faith.'

'What kind of sect is this?' asked Rhacelus glaring at the crowds rushing past. 'What do these barbarians have to hide? Besides their ignorance, that

is.’

They had reached a narrow footbridge that soared across a maze of distant streets. Mephiston had led them out of the main flow of the crowd and towards a quieter district. ‘They are true to the Emperor,’ he said, flatly. ‘They are not heretics. They are not even particularly unorthodox.’ He paused as a regiment of dragoons jogged past, lasrifles slung on their backs as they hurried to join the masses heading towards the amphitheatre. They were flamboyantly dressed with gleaming brass cuirasses and tall, plumed helmets, but they all bore scars and their fatigues were torn and bloodstained. They were clearly hardened fighters.

As the long column of troops rushed by, some of them glanced in surprise at the Blood Angels and a few even had the presence of mind to salute as they passed, but it was clear from their blissful, transported expressions that they were as ecstatic as the priests. As the last few stomped past, Antros noticed a familiar symbol engraved across their breastplates: the same, ornate, upside-down T that Prester Cyriak had tattooed on his forehead. He finally made the connection that he imagined his brothers had already made – the upside down T was a sword hilt.

‘Their faith centres on the Emperor,’ continued Mephiston, once the long column of soldiers and tanks had finally passed. ‘But it is a faith clouded by myths and ancestor worship.’ He nodded at the books he had given to Antros. ‘The abbot has shared much of his knowledge with me. He told me the true purpose of the Children of the Vow – they are sworn, *above all*, to preserve the safety and the mystery of the Blade Petrific. Every precept and ritual is intended to ensure its secrecy – even from the rest of the Adeptus Ministorum.’

‘Why?’ asked Antros, as they continued over the bridge, away from the dragoons. ‘If they are not traitors, why keep secrets from their own brothers?’

‘They have been beguiled by their faith,’ replied Mephiston, stopping to examine a doorway. The bone-wrought lintel had been contorted to resemble a great eagle’s claw, grasping the door in its bleached talons. There were symbols carved into the columns on either side of its perch and Mephiston began tracing them with his finger, trying to discern their meaning. ‘Confessor Zin described their colourful creation myths, but you will remember that he stopped short of telling us the crux of the vow.

Father Orsuf was not so coy. The priests on Divinus Prime believe that it is their sacred task to preserve the Blade Petrific in secrecy because one day the God-Emperor will rise from his Golden Throne to reclaim it. And, as long as they have kept His blade safe, He will begin a Day of Wrath that will cleanse the galaxy of unbelief. Their greatest fear is that some pugnacious warrior might decide to use the blade as an actual weapon and take it from its shrine.'

'As you mean to do?' said Antros.

Mephiston gave no reply, absorbed by the runes on the pillar he was examining, but Antros and Rhacelus exchanged meaningful glances. Even in this quiet street they could hear the thousands of fanatics pouring through the city behind them.

'Thank you, Father Orsuf,' said Mephiston as the characters on the columns pulsed into life, lit by a cerulean fire that flickered and danced, lighting up the Chief Librarian's corpse-like features.

The light swelled in brightness and the ossified door unravelled itself, the bones sliding and unlooping like laces being unfastened from a boot. After a few seconds, they were left facing a long, gloomy hallway that led to a second door.

Mephiston strode into the shadows and the other two Blood Angels hurried after him. Watching over the second door was a bored looking Guardsman, dressed in the same blue-and-brass uniform as the dragoons they had passed on the bridge. At the sight of the Blood Angels he grabbed his lasrifle and aimed, his eyes wide with alarm as he registered the size of the three warriors storming down the hallway towards him.

'Halt!' he cried. 'You're not allowed in here! If you don't–'

The guard's words were cut short by a single glance from Mephiston. The guard froze, statue-like, his mouth wide open, as though he were a character in a painting.

Trapping the man in a fragment of time was a minor display of psychic power and Antros and Rhacelus barely registered it, following Mephiston without comment as he strode on past the inanimate figure and through the door.

It led them into a small antechamber that in turn led them to a sweeping staircase. At the top of the stairs they walked out onto a broad, circular balcony, hundreds of feet in diameter and looking down over a strange-

looking hall. It was lit by several large braziers that revealed an army of supine corpses. The bodies completely filled the floor of the large chamber, and it reminded Antros of a slaughterhouse. The corpses were arranged on slabs in neat rows in varying degrees of dismemberment. Some were grinning, skinless cadavers, glistening in the torchlight; others were no more than skeletons. There were a dozen or so hooded priests working on the bodies, wielding curved, ceremonial knives and slopping innards into large, ceramic urns. The priests worked in twos. As one sliced and chopped, the other read prayers from a small book, waving his free hand over the gradually disintegrating bodies, drawing shapes in the air.

The air was thick with censer smoke but as the light of the braziers flickered across the balconies it flashed on the Blood Angels' armour, causing the priests to look up in surprise. There were priests up on the balcony too, and at the sight of the Blood Angels some of them cried out and started hurrying towards them. Mephiston reached out into the fumes and needles of crimson light flickered through the vapours. Before the priests had taken more than a few steps, they were jolted to a halt by the same force that had frozen the man at the door.

Mephiston waved for the other two Blood Angels to follow him as he climbed down some steps into the chamber.

'The people of Mormotha do not realise it,' said Mephiston, rushing through the fumes, 'but their enemy has already breached the gates.'

He walked around the mortuary slabs, looking back at Antros and Rhacelus. 'We must move fast, or the city will be in ruins by nightfall and there will be an army between us and the Blade Petrific.'

'My lord,' said Rhacelus. 'What else have you seen? What is your plan?' He glanced at the static figures that surrounded them. 'They may be an uncouth mob, but they are Imperial citizens.'

Mephiston tapped one of the blood-filled vials hanging at his belt. 'I have drunk deep of Father Orsuf's learning. His blood may be old and thin, but it is rich with knowledge. I have tasted the entire history of this city. A fascinating subject.'

He made his way past the rows of bodies and pointed Vitarus at a doorway at the far side of the chamber. 'These mortuaries are scattered across the city, linked by miles of catacombs.'

As they neared the door, Mephiston waved his sword slightly and it

hissed open. ‘We will not need to fight our way through the crowds.’ He led them on into an arrow-straight, vaulted passageway, lined with braziers and decorated with gruesome friezes demonstrating the obscure funerary rites of the Vow. ‘This passageway will bring us out into the amphitheatre, near where the arch-cardinal intends to make his speech.’

Cadaverous faces loomed out of the shadows, grinning in the firelight as the Blood Angels hurried past the mosaics.

Antros staggered to a halt as Mephiston fell and slumped against the wall, shaking his head, as though attacked by a swarm of insects.

Rhacelus and Antros stepped towards him, then halted as the Chief Librarian began to ripple and distort, as though seen through falling water. He gave an angry roar and wrenched himself back from the wall, leaving behind a ghostly mirror image of himself, still shimmering against the mosaics. The slumped Mephiston quickly faded into shadow as the roaring one lurched off down the passageway, before crashing into a pillar with such force that he filled the passageway with dust and elicited a worrying groan from the ceiling. Dozens of ossified bones crashed down around them, exploding into dust as they hit the ground.

‘Chief Librarian!’ gasped Antros as they reached him. He was leaning heavily against the pillar and the blood film had washed back over his eyes. As Mephiston turned to face them, he held up a hand in warning.

They backed away, but Mephiston’s face twisted with pain and he seemed unable to lower his hand. It started to vibrate and droplets of dark fire dripped from his fingers.

Fingers of light knifed up from beneath their feet as the ground started to crack.

‘Calistarius!’ cried Rhacelus, his voice deep and commanding.

Mephiston howled and clenched his hand into a fist. The light vanished and the passageway fell silent again.

Mephiston staggered away from them, clutching his still smouldering fist.

They dashed after him and caught him before he fell.

For a dreadful moment, Antros saw not Mephiston’s face, but the face he had glimpsed on Thermia: the flayed woman, staring at him through a stained veil. Her words filled Antros’ mind and he knew Mephiston was hearing them too. *We are what our scars have made us. We are born in*

blood.

Then the gruesome face was gone and he was facing Mephiston again.

'We need to be fast,' Mephiston gasped as the blood drained from his eyes. 'The Gift is growing more powerful. The change in me is accelerating.' He looked around the passageway. Some of the braziers were still alight and he stared at the piles of fallen bones. 'Whatever power has hidden this world is magnifying the Gift.'

He stepped away from them, still gripping his hand. 'We must reach the arch-cardinal to find out the location of the Blade Petrific. But I sense that Chaos is already here in this city – and that something disastrous will happen as Dravus makes his speech if we do not get there first.' He shook his head. 'I should be able to see more clearly but this so-called "Miracle" clouds my every thought.'

Rhacelus nodded. 'I feel it too. I have searched for the minds of these priests but all I see is a mirror of my own thoughts. It is impossible to be sure about anything.'

'The blade is in a reliquary of some kind,' said Mephiston. 'I can see that much. But "reliquary" describes most of this planet.'

'What if we performed the Rubric of Consonance?' asked Antros. He raised his staff and looked from Rhacelus to Mephiston. 'Surely we have enough power *between* us to find such a powerful psychic lodestone? The thing must shine like a beacon.'

Mephiston shook his head. 'The Rubric of Consonance would serve no purpose.' He winced and staggered, then steadied himself by stabbing Vitarus into the ground. 'The Blade Petrific has no power for us to locate, even if we did join our intellects. It is a machine, a harness for power, rather than power itself. No. We need Arch-Cardinal Dravus to tell us where the Children of the Vow have kept it hidden for all these centuries.'

'Captain Vatrenus,' he snapped over the vox. 'Have you reached the gates?'

'*Chief Librarian,*' came the reply. '*I left Sergeant Hestias and his squad at the south gate and I am leading Squad Seriphus to the north gate myself. It is…*' He paused and a roaring sound washed over the network. '*The crowds are large, Chief Librarian,*' said Vatrenus. '*It is taking longer than I thought to reach the gates.*'

'Try harder,' said Mephiston. 'I *must* have you at those gates. They are

warded in a way that I do not understand. My mind cannot seem to touch them. I will need you there to operate them manually. What about the sluice gate? Did your Techmarine reach the sluice gate?'

'*Yes, Chief Librarian, Brother Gallus is there and he tells me he can operate the mechanism. Although he could not discern the purpose of the thing.*'

'Good,' replied Mephiston. 'Make sure you are ready to close those gates on my command. I am relying on you, captain.' With that, he headed off into the shadows, weaving from side to side like a drunk.

They picked up their pace and broke into the long, loping strides of an Adeptus Astartes battle march, powering through the gloom and passing through several more gruesome, corpse-crammed mortuaries. Unlike the first, these chambers were empty, showing signs of having being abandoned in a hurry, with knives and saws scattered across bloodstained slabs.

They reached a shallow stair leading upwards towards the distant glow of daylight. Mephiston had begun growling obscure phrases. He was steadier on his feet though and pounded up the stairs without a moment's pause.

The stairs continued for a long time and Antros got the sense that they were ascending to one of the highest points in the city. As they climbed, they began to hear a low, rhythmic sound. It was like the roar of a vast ocean, but each boom arrived with metronomic precision. The noise grew louder as they climbed, until it seemed as though they were trapped in the chambers of an enormous heart.

They came to a set of tall doors, at least twice the height of the Blood Angels, topped with a sculpted tympanum designed to resemble a roaring chimera, grasping the portal in its claws. The doors were locked from the outside but a single wave from Mephiston slid the bolts back and hurled the doors open, bathing him in sunlight.

The three Blood Angels emerged into a large chamber that led to an ornate balcony, high in the uppermost tiers of the amphitheatre. From this vantage point, the scale of the stadium was incredible – its slopes tumbled down away from them like the sides of a mountain, making it look more like a sublime work of nature than something created by man. The building was perfectly circular and its sheer walls, hundreds of feet tall in their own right, were crowned by towering statues. The statues' details had

worn away but they seemed to be some kind of priests, raising their arms to the heavens in tribute. Antros noticed that, unlike the rest of the city, the amphitheatre was built of stone. It was clearly ancient, so he presumed that it must predate all the ossuaries that surrounded it. The marble slabs were rounded and cracked, and the faces of the statues had long ago faded into obscurity.

The first thing that hit the Blood Angels, even before the grandeur of the crumbling architecture, was the noise. Thousands of priests and soldiers had crammed into the terraces below, all chanting the name Dravus, over and over again. This was the sound they had heard from behind the doors. So many voices, crying out in unison, created an immense wall of noise and Antros felt his pulse quicken in response. Hundreds of mechanised hymnals and servo-skulls were circling above the crowd, showering them with scraps of parchment, creating a blizzard of holy screeds that billowed and banked across the amphitheatre.

'How will we find the arch-cardinal in this?' shouted Rhacelus, struggling to be heard over the tidal roar of the priests.

Mephiston was leaning against the balcony, head down and shoulders slumped.

'My lord,' said Antros rushing to help him.

Mephiston lifted his head and waved Antros away. 'The abbot knows every inch of this city,' he said, pointing Vitarus at the balcony next to theirs, just a few feet away. It was far grander than the surrounding ones, its stone sculpted into the shape of a two-headed eagle with a serpent hanging from one of its beaks. There were a few priests on the balcony and several brass-armoured dragoons, their guns held in readiness as they surveyed the sea of people below. 'His directions have led us to exactly where we need to be,' said Mephiston. 'The arch-cardinal will address the crowd from that balcony.'

Antros looked down at the roaring throng. 'Do you mean to interrupt him, my lord?'

Mephiston shook his head. 'I mean to keep him alive. My prognostications were clear on one thing – there are heretics in this amphitheatre. Blood will be spilled. We must watch over Dravus until the enemy reveals himself. He intends to strike here, now. Be ready.'

Rhacelus grimaced. 'I'm so pleased that we will be able to enjoy

whatever profundities Dravus intends to share.'

Mephiston did not respond to his equerry's caustic tone. He looked out across the crowd and was about to say more when the dragoons on the next balcony noticed the three armour-clad giants that had appeared behind them. One of them spoke into a vox-unit at his wrist and pointed at them.

Rhacelus smiled and gripped the handle of his bolt pistol. 'Perhaps we will avoid the sermon after all.'

There was a second door behind them, smaller than the one they had arrived through, and after a few minutes it flew open and two dragoons marched onto the broad balcony. There were more of the soldiers in the passageway, all with their guns trained on the Blood Angels.

The soldier who entered first stumbled to a halt at the sight of the Blood Angels. None of the Librarians had raised their weapons, but the soldier kept his laspistol aloft as he studied the three of them in turn. When his eyes came to rest on Mephiston the colour drained from his face and he looked back over his shoulder, considering flight. His nerve held. 'Who admitted you to this chamber?' His voice trembled, but shouting seemed to give him confidence and he stepped closer, waving his pistol to summon more soldiers onto the balcony. 'These rooms are reserved for the brothers of the Mortis Cantorum. You have no right to be here.' He nodded to the open door and the rows of lasweapons pointing at them. 'Follow me,' he said without much conviction. 'I will escort you to one of the public viewing platforms.'

Rhacelus raised an amused eyebrow but Antros noticed that Mephiston's expression was even more severe than usual. He looked to be in pain. Antros was about to intercede when the crowd roared. The noise dwarfed the volume of even the previous cheers and Antros half expected the walls to come tumbling down.

The officer in charge of the soldiers edged forwards and looked out over the edge of the balcony. 'He's here!' he cried. He held up one of the silver sword hilts and waved it at his men. They mirrored the gesture, rushing forwards to join him.

Antros looked over their heads and saw an incredible sight. Every one of the priests and soldiers crammed into the amphitheatre had raised a matching metal icon. Thousands of them flashed in the sunlight, turning the terraces into a lake of silver.

‘Dravus!’ roared the soldiers standing with the Blood Angels, joining their voices to the thousands below.

The soldiers stared at the next balcony and Antros followed their gaze.

A small, slender figure had emerged, flanked by white-robed priests carrying gilt-stitched banners and walking with their heads bowed, forming a stately procession as they followed him out onto the balcony. The man leading them was dressed in a plain, white surplice and looked quite unprepossessing. He had soft, childish features and a sweet, slightly self-conscious smile. It was clear from his physique that he had never known physical work of any kind, and his only badge of office was a small, iron bolt, hung around his neck on a slender chain. The bolt was broken and rusted, but he wore it like a medal. He seemed a timid, circumscribed kind of man and he was an odd mixture of old and young – his skin was dry and heavily wrinkled, but his naive smile reminded Antros of a pleasantly mystified infant.

The crowds were blind to the arch-cardinal’s unimpressive appearance, waving their icons wildly and howling his name as he stepped slowly through the whirling strips of paper still falling from the sky. As he reached the edge of the balcony, Arch-Cardinal Dravus tried to assume a more serious expression, but he could not entirely suppress his smile, so he ended up smirking at his ecstatic followers. He raised a hand for silence but it took several minutes for the noise to die away.

‘Through everything,’ he said, his gentle voice amplified by a wall of speakers arrayed beneath the balcony, ‘you kept your faith. You. Kept. Your. Faith. Truly, you are the Children of the Vow.’

The crowd erupted into another explosion of cheers, and, much as he tried, Dravus could not quell their delight. Eventually, he gave up and looked at his attendant priests with an embarrassed grin.

Antros noticed that Mephiston was looking away from the arch-cardinal, across the crowds to the far side of the amphitheatre. He peered through the clouds of whirling paper to see what Mephiston was so fixated on. There was a splash of blood-red armour amongst the bleached stones. It was Vatrenus’ Techmarine, Gallus, on the roof of the terraces, high above Dravus’ enraptured audience. He was crouched next to an opening in the masonry, his mechanised servo-arm working at some kind of device. Antros looked around the amphitheatre and saw Squad Hestias waiting just

outside one of the two gates that led into the amphitheatre, their bolters held in readiness as they watched the crowds of pilgrims pouring past. He could see no sign of Captain Vatrenus or Squad Seriphus.

'What…?' he began to say, but he realised there was no hope of being heard. Rhacelus caught his eye and nodded to Antros' bolt pistol. Antros' body immediately switched into a state of battle-readiness. His secondary heart began pounding and his muscles flexed and tensed beneath his armour. As he looked down at the thousands of souls gathered below, he realised what a prime target the amphitheatre would be for Pieter Zorambus. This huge gathering must account for most of the planet's standing army, not to mention its militia and priesthood. He flicked the safety off his bolt pistol and gripped his staff a little tighter.

Finally, the cheers faded and Arch-Cardinal Dravus stepped to the front of the balcony, still smiling.

'Your devotion has not gone unnoticed,' he said, speaking quickly to avoid another cheer. 'I have spent many hours alone in the wilderness. With nothing in my stomach and only the stars above my head, I could finally see clearly. I asked myself how I let our ancient brotherhood come to this terrible impasse – brother turning on brother in a shameful war that shields us from the beauty overhead.' He lifted his icon and pointed it at the sky. The clouds were low and fast-moving, but still revealed a few glimpses of the mirror image that hung constantly overhead. 'This war cannot be right. It *cannot* be right.' His smile faded. 'How can it be that we have ended up so estranged? How can one side be so wrong when we all worship the same Emperor?' He clutched the icon at his neck. 'I stared long into the night, my brothers and, finally, my questions were answered. I have learned the true meaning of the Miracle. Now I mean to share it with you all.'

The crowd fell quiet.

Mephiston barged past Antros, muttering under his breath and shaking his head. He reached the side of the balcony and stared at Dravus.

Dravus drew one of the silver sword hilts from his robes and held it up to the crowd. 'The symbols you were handed on your way here today are not simply a mark of brotherhood – they are blessed. There is a portion of the Miracle within each of them.' His smirk became a broad grin as he waved at the storm of paper strips falling through the air. 'Simply read the truth

and open your souls.'

Then things moved so fast that even Antros' battle-ready senses struggled to follow them.

'I'm a fool,' growled Mephiston. 'It's Dravus!' Then he launched himself from the balcony, spectral black wings erupting from his back. 'Captain Vatrenus!' he cried. 'Now! Close the gates!'

Dravus snatched one of the pieces of paper and read the words that covered it.

The crowds below did the same, grinning as they echoed his words.

Mephiston reached the other balcony with a single pound of his wings, drawing Vitarus as he crashed through the huddle of priests and guards. The blade flickered into life as he drew it back to strike Arch-Cardinal Dravus down.

The attendant priests howled in outrage and tried to block his way, then froze as they saw that the arch-cardinal had vanished, replaced by a whirling column of blue-and-pink fire. It was a tornado of light, spinning around strange, feathery tendrils of energy that undulated and rippled as though caressing the flames.

As the priests backed away in horror, Mephiston lunged at the blue inferno, thrusting Vitarus into its heart.

His blade sliced into the blue flames and the inferno exploded, hurling him back through the air, toppling priests and soldiers with a fierce shock wave.

Mephiston crashed backwards through the balustrade and fell, plunging towards the distant crowds. 'Vatrenus!' he cried as he fell. 'The gates!'

Antros hefted his staff over his head and brought it down in a chopping motion, hurling crimson lightning at the blue fire. Red tore into blue, crushing it like a fist.

Light spilled up through the cracks beneath Antros' feet, but he poured all his effort into containing the blue flames. Then he felt a violent backdraught of psychic energy cut through his mind. In one instant, he saw what a lumbering, dogmatic behemoth the Imperium was. He understood, for the first time, how crippled the Lords of Terra were by their blind intolerance. Anger swelled in him as he saw how the Librarius was shackled by intellectual dwarfs, simpletons with no understanding of what it meant to weave the power of the warp. He barely noticed that his

thoughts were influencing the nature of his psychic blast. As his anger grew, his power started to feed, rather than contain the blue flames, causing the conflagration to grow, spewing its odd, feathered tendrils across the walls of the amphitheatre and reaching out towards the other balconies, including the one where Antros and Rhacelus were standing.

'Lexicanium!' said Rhacelus, snapping Antros away from a heady vision in which he strode the heavens, crushing the enemies of mankind with a thought.

'Walk the fathomless path!' snapped Rhacelus, gripping him by the arm.

As Rhacelus' grip dragged him back to his training at the abbey, Antros recoiled from the fury and derision he had felt. The blue fire was burning into his soul, warping his essence into something unfamiliar.

'Rhacelus!' he cried. 'What is this?'

Rhacelus shook his head and drew his force sword, jabbing it at the other balcony, adding his own shaft of red light to Antros' blast.

Bolstered by the might of Rhacelus' mind, the red storm enveloped the shape that had previously been the arch-cardinal.

Antros staggered back, unsteadied by pain and confusion. He lowered his staff and looked down from the balcony to see what could attack him with such ferocity.

The amphitheatre was an ocean of blue flame. The thousands that gathered to hear Dravus speak had been transformed by his words, robed priests and armoured soldiers replaced by incandescent pillars of light. Gliding above, silhouetted by the flames, was Mephiston, his psychic wings spread and his sword trailing fire. He banked, looped and soared back up towards the balconies.

With Antros distracted, Rhacelus was knocked back and dropped his sword. The blade clattered across the stone floor, loosing arcs of psychic fire and tearing great chunks out of the balcony, knocking several of the soldiers off their feet.

Mephiston swooped through the dazzling light and Arch-Cardinal Dravus emerged from his fire-cocoon with his arms open in welcome, smiling eagerly at the Chief Librarian.

The arch-cardinal was no longer so unimpressive. His robes had fallen away to reveal a physique transformed by sorcery. His body was now unnaturally tall, with thick, powerful muscles. His skin was a reptilian

layer of iridescent scales, flashing blue and pink as he moved, and his face gleamed with a metallic sheen as he grinned at Mephiston. He held a glittering, gold-chased spear in his hands and the weapon was beautiful. It looked like a glinting shard of lapis lazuli. It refracted the light blazing from the crowds below, spraying lances of blue and pink light through the air. Dravus laughed as the rays of light speared the people on the balconies, transforming them in the same way it had the multitude below.

Rhacelus stumbled to Antros' side, clutching his head in pain as he hauled the Lexicanium to his feet. They both managed to rise but then the spears of light knifed into them. Antros' head exploded with bewildering visions: deafening colours, eye-watering sounds and agonising smells. He almost lost his sense of place as the kaleidoscope tore through his mind, but he could still feel Rhacelus gripping his arm and he latched on to that sensation, trying to anchor himself in reality. He resisted the lurid visions by reciting the wards and invocations he had learned in the abbey. He heard Rhacelus at his side, mirroring his words, and between them they drove back the madness. Antros raised his staff, Rhacelus raised his sword and, side by side, they walked into the tumult, howling Mephiston's words into the magic-torn air.

They forced a path through the fire, and the balcony appeared before them. Antros cursed as he saw the soldiers who had been standing near them. They were undergoing a nauseating metamorphosis. Their bodies were looping and folding, mutating and oscillating into a bewildering jumble of limbs and faces.

Revulsion filled his thoughts, but Antros strived to remain calm as he turned his curses on the garish forms. One of the mutants leapt towards him. Its armour had split in several places to accommodate a forest of serpents that sprouted from its torso. They were no ordinary snakes – each of them ended in a foot-long, serrated blade.

A storm of knife blows hit Antros and he staggered backwards, raising his staff to fend off the attack. The mutant followed him with a flurry of scrabbling limbs, giggling hysterically as it pummelled his chest and head, clawing at his armour and trying to wrench the plates apart.

Antros jammed his bolt pistol in the mutant's face and fired, filling the air with a pink spray of gore.

Tasting blood, Antros' composure fell away, snatched by a tide of fury.

He felt an animal hunger to kill and rend. More of the mutants were pouring onto the balcony, and Antros launched himself at them with a feral roar. They smashed through the balcony together, spinning out into the air and falling in a shower of bones and thrashing limbs.

Captain Vatrenus cursed as the world collapsed into colour and noise. For the last hour they had been trying to reach the second gate, ploughing through a tedious crush of ecstatic priests and grinning soldiers, but at Dravus' command the doe-eyed hordes had erupted into blue flame. Now the entire amphitheatre was transforming before his eyes.

Seriphus and the rest of the squad raised their bolters and formed a circle around him, struggling to discern shapes in the inferno.

'What is that…?' began the sergeant, peering into the blinding light.

Barbed tentacles lashed out and slammed into the sergeant, knocking him from his feet and sending him crashing into his men. As Seriphus fell, the tentacle tightened around his chest armour with a crack of breaking ceramite.

The glare faded and the mob of priests was gone, replaced by a boiling mass of mutants – snarling, feral things that charged towards them bearing guns and knives.

'Fire at will!' cried Vatrenus and the Blood Angels unleashed a deafening volley of bolter shells.

Vatrenus triggered his chainsword, strode forwards and hacked away the limb that had latched around Sergeant Seriphus. The limb's owner leapt to the attack. It must once have been a soldier, but its skull had split into a pair of screaming, avian heads and the body was contorted by a forest of writhing limbs.

Captain Vatrenus waited calmly until it was almost on him, then fired his bolt pistol twice with cool precision, turning both heads into a spray of feathers and bone fragments.

'*Captain Vatrenus!*' came Mephiston's voice over the vox-network. '*The gates! Close them now!*'

Vatrenus cursed again as he loosed another volley of shots into the crowd of mutants. The gates were no more than thirty feet away, their crumbling, ancient columns towering over him, but there was now a sea of screaming mutants in the way.

‘Hestias!’ he barked into the vox, still gunning down the mutants. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘*Yes, captain,*’ replied Sergeant Hestias from the south side of the amphitheatre. ‘*Closing the gates now. Are you still inside?*’

‘Not for long,’ replied Captain Vatrenus. ‘The gates!’ he cried, leading his men forwards. ‘Now!’

Vatrenus hacked through the screaming throng, bringing his chainsword round in broad, furious swipes, severing limbs and armour and filling the air with gore. The blade growled and jolted in his grip, tearing a path to the gates.

Behind him, Squad Seriphus spread out into a semicircle, firing from the hip as the hysterical mutants crashed into them.

Captain Vatrenus felt his hearts quicken as his visor turned crimson with blood. The weight of the mutants pressed against him, hundreds of gaudy, freakish things, hacking at his power armour with knives and pummelling him with scaled limbs. He felt as though he were cutting through a surreal carnival. His chainsword joined its scream to that of the mutants, trailing sparks and smoke as it started to overheat. A cold fury came over him and he ripped his way through the crowds like an animal.

With a bestial roar, Captain Vatrenus reached the enormous gates. Mephiston had given him clear instructions. He punched through the head of a mutant, spraying the walls with blood, and grasped one of the faces sculpted into the stone.

Before he could yank it away, dozens of the mutants barrelled into him, knocking him back from the doorway. He hit the ground hard, enveloped in barbed, serpentine limbs that sliced into his power armour with a grinding squeal.

He brought his chainsword round but the blades died with a clatter, clogged with bones and armour. He hurled it aside and reached for his combat knife. Before he could use the blade, one of the mutants – a teetering giant with hideously elongated limbs – locked its arms around him, fixing him to the spot so the other mutants could assail him with their blades and claws.

Vatrenus climbed to his feet with a roar and hurled the giant off. Then he raised his bolt pistol and fired another barrage of bolt shells into the others that were swarming over him.

‘Seriphus?’ he gasped into the vox, struggling to catch his breath as he punched his way through the crowd, back towards the pillar at the side of the gate.

There was no reply and he paused, looking back into the tumbling crowds of mutants. He caught glimpses of crimson armour in the storm of blue and pink. ‘Seriphus!’ he cried, reaching the stone gargoyle that Mephiston had told him was a lever.

‘Captain,’ came a muffled reply. Then the sergeant smashed through the wall of mutants, followed by the rest of the squad. They were drenched in blood but Vatrenus did not look to see if it was theirs or the mutants’. The second they crossed the threshold and made it out of the amphitheatre, Vatrenus wrenched the stone face from the wall and yanked down the lever behind it.

There was a grinding roar as tonnes of stone dropped from the arch overhead, slamming down into place just seconds after the Blood Angels got clear. As the door crashed into place, it pulverised dozens of the mutants, hitting the ground with such violence that even the Space Marines struggled to remain standing.

Vatrenus gunned down the few mutants trapped outside the gate and then, when he was sure there were no more, he spoke calmly into the vox. ‘Chief Librarian,’ he said. ‘It is done. The amphitheatre is sealed.’

Mutants were all over Antros as he plunged towards the crowds below. He bit and hacked at them while they stabbed with their living blades and tightened snake-like arms around his throat, attempting to crush the life out of him.

As he fell, Antros howled lines from *The Glutted Scythe* and the mutants that had fallen with him exploded in a shower of blood and screams.

Seconds before he hit the ground, Antros managed to cry out a conjuration. Warp energy billowed from his spine, forming wings out of the aether. He pounded them once before slamming into the dust.

The force of the impact was so great that Antros almost lost consciousness. The roar of the crowd dragged him back. His psychic wings dissipated, but that single beat had been enough to save his life. He clambered to his feet and, as his animal bloodlust faded, he saw that he was surrounded by thousands of mutants. His fall had crushed a few,

creating a small space in the mob, but all those nearby had turned to face him with leering grins on their grotesque faces.

Some were like the ones who had knocked him from the balcony, with tentacle-limbs ending in blades, but others had been cursed with other mutations. Some had feathered, avian heads on their shoulders; long, curved beaks jutted from their faces, wrenching their skulls out of shape and forcing their eyes onto the sides of their heads. Others had lost their heads completely and now sported the flat, black-eyed faces of ray fish in their chests. Some teetered on backward-jointed goat legs that were covered in iridescent blue and pink feathers. There were so many of the mutants that Antros could see nothing else as they launched at him from every direction.

He had managed to cling on to his staff and, as the first wave of mutants leapt at him, Antros roared an evocation and a crimson sphere burst from the ground – a shimmering dome that completely encased him. Even as he spoke the words, Antros realised that he had not plucked them from any of the prescribed texts. Without thinking, he had attempted to make a miniature copy of Mephiston's Chemic Spheres.

As the mutants collided with the red sphere, their bodies exploded into flame, ignited by the warpfire rippling through the dome. They thrashed and howled against the shifting surface, until the scorched wreckage of their bodies slid to the ground, covering the dome with innards and charred meat.

Through the wall of blood Antros saw the rest of the mutants hesitate, before they screamed and charged in a great wave of limbs and bodies, crashing against his blood shield with delighted howls.

Antros gasped as his mind buckled under the strain of maintaining the sphere while hundreds of mutants threw themselves against it. He roared his evocation repeatedly, incinerating countless numbers of the mutants, but they had been unhinged by their transformation. Fearless, they fried and burst against the force of his mind.

Gradually, the dome started to give, sagging towards Antros beneath the weight of living and dead mutants. He kept roaring the words but he was slowly being buried alive. He dropped to one knee, trying to take the weight of the mutants on his shoulder, but hundreds of them were swarming over him.

‘No,’ he breathed, as talons and blades started to cut through the shield, clattering against his armour. ‘This cannot happen.’ The face of his dead brother, Ramiel, filled his mind. He was being crushed, just as had happened to Ramiel. What if Ramiel had been the brother who was destined for greatness? What if he should have lived? What if it was not fate that let him die, but Antros?

‘No! It cannot end now!’ he growled. He was hunched beneath degraded foes and his face was smeared with evidence of his own barbarism. He could not accept that this would be how he ended. ‘Not like this!’ he cried.

The shield dropped again and Antros was forced onto his back. Even the ceramite of his battleplate could not hold under such a weight. It started to groan and crack, spitting rivets and spewing oil as it broke. His helmet blared warnings as the suit’s vital functions began to fail. ‘Not like this!’ he howled, picturing Ramiel again, crushed beneath the sand roamer. Rage exploded in his mind and bloodlust threatened to overcome him again.

‘No!’ he snarled, thinking back through the lines of *The Glutted Scythe* that Rhacelus had read with him. An invocation spilled from his lips before he had a chance to consider what he was saying. Again, the words came from instinct, rather than memory.

The ground began to rotate. Slowly at first, but with growing speed. The world became a blur and Antros realised that he, rather than the ground, was spinning – but the surrounding mutants were all turning with him. He had become a tornado and they were caught in the fury of his storm. Their bodies began to tear and snap as he turned faster and faster, blood flowing out of them in great gouts and forming a whirling column that reached up towards the mirrored sky.

With a final howl, Antros loosed his grip on the tower of spinning mutants and hurled them away from him in their hundreds.

He staggered to a halt and wiped the blood from his visor. He had carved a new space in the mass of cultists, but this time it was much larger. There was only one figure standing in the open space. Epistolary Rhacelus shook his head as he strode through the mounds of pulped flesh.

Antros was about to speak when he fell forwards, overwhelmed by exhaustion.

Rhacelus gave a grudging nod of respect as he caught him.

Antros clung on to Rhacelus and looked around. Deranged as they were,

the mutants had taken a moment's pause after seeing the warp storm that had spilled from Antros' mind. The sight of his exhaustion was enough to remind them that they were thousands against two, however, and their grins returned as they loped and lurched towards the Blood Angels.

'The Chief Librarian has Dravus,' said Rhacelus, showing no sign of concern as the hordes charged towards them from every direction.

Without even looking at the mutants, he muttered an oath and raised one of his hands, fingers splayed, to the sky.

The arteries of the nearest mutants burst from their bodies, exploding through their skin like a nest of ruby serpents. The force of their escaping veins ripped them apart, and the first few ranks collapsed, falling to the ground as ragged chunks of meat.

The subsequent ranks stumbled and fell over their shredded kin, sprawling in wet innards and creating a struggling barrier for the next ranks to crash into.

'We need to be away from here,' said Rhacelus, hauling Antros back onto his feet. 'Now,' he said, summoning vaporous wings from his back and nodding for Antros to do the same.

'I have nothing left,' gasped Antros, but even as he spoke the words he found the strength to do as Rhacelus ordered.

Together, they launched into the sky, seconds before the crowd of mutants closed around them.

Agony knifed through Antros' skull as he powered himself up through the air. He had never pushed his mind so far. That, combined with the blood fury that had consumed him a few minutes earlier, had left him trembling and weak. He wondered how he would hold pace with Rhacelus. The veteran looked as though he had not even broken a sweat.

They flew back up towards the wrecked balconies and Antros saw Mephiston locked in battle with Dravus. Whatever Dravus might once have been, he was now clearly one of the lost and the damned. His odd, iridescent skin shimmered as he fought, and rays of blue light were still radiating from his gemstone spear, spreading a canopy of light across the whole amphitheatre.

They flew close to the balcony, but Antros could see nowhere to land. The parts that had not fallen away were crammed with howling mutants, many firing laspistols at the two duelling figures perched on one of the statues

that ringed the amphitheatre. Mephiston and Dravus were fighting on the edge of a crumbling stone shield, thirty feet wide across the top and scorched by sorcery.

At the sight of Antros and Rhacelus, the cultists turned their fire on the two Librarians, filling the sky with blinding trails of light.

Rhacelus raised his hand again, pulling spitting veins from the mutants' bodies, ripping them into a slop of organs and skin.

The Librarians landed in the spot Rhacelus had cleared and braced for the impact of the other cultists who were charging towards them.

Antros' head was a ball of agony, so he unholstered his pistol and unleashed a barrage of bolt fire as Rhacelus wrenched the enemy apart with their own blood.

Someone broke through the crowd and raced towards Antros. Antros was about to stop him with a blast through the chest, when he realised that the man had not been mutated. It was only when he was a few feet away that Antros recognised him.

'Zin?' he gasped, rushing towards the priest.

Confessor Zin reached out to him, his face contorted by agony as he tried to stem the blood flowing from a wound in his side.

'We must save the cardinal!' cried Zin, waving at the glittering figure battling with Mephiston. 'Use your power, Librarian! You can undo this curse.' Zin's eyes were wild and frantic. 'Call to your lord. Dravus is a good man! This can't be how it seems. There must be a way to save him and…' He looked down, confused and horrified, at the host below. 'There must be a way to save everyone.'

Antros reached out to take his hand, then paused, noticing how long and spider-like Zin's fingers had become. They were also far too numerous as they flicked and twitched towards him.

Antros was still registering the mutation when Rhacelus stepped between them and brought down his sword, beheading Zin with one clean strike.

'Too late,' he snapped, as Zin's blood rushed over Antros' armour.

Antros backed away in disgust as Zin's corpse exploded into a mass of writhing serpents, hissing and coiling, even as the confessor's life rushed from his severed neck.

There was no time to dwell on what had happened as another wave of cultists rushed towards them. Antros felled several more with his bolt

pistol, then looked up at the duel between Mephiston and Dravus, or whatever Dravus had become.

Mephiston lashed out several times with Vitarus, but Dravus merely laughed, blocking the furious blows easily with his dazzling spear. Dravus was moving with unnatural speed and grace, matching even Mephiston's skill.

Antros realised that Mephiston was holding back his power, struggling not to vent his full fury. He wielded his sword with one hand and clutched his head with the other, reeling as he fought.

'We must get to him!' cried Antros, but Rhacelus shook his head.

'The Chief Librarian does not need our help.' He yanked his hand back through the air, hauling more arteries from the mutants that surrounded them, filling the air with another forest of crimson threads. 'But these lost souls do.'

'Wait!' cried a voice, and the cultists all paused to look up at the broken statue. Antros and Rhacelus saw that Dravus was keeping Mephiston at bay with his spear and had raised his other hand into the air. 'Children of the Vow!' he cried, grinning. 'I did not enlighten you so that you could waste your time on these off-worlders! I have enlightened you so that we can march beside the Unbegotten Prince. He has called us to his banner.'

Mephiston stayed his blows and stepped back along the shield edge, lowering Vitarus and allowing Dravus to talk.

'Now that we have seen the truth of his words, we must join Pieter Zorambus and help him realise his vision. You…' he cried, waving at the terraces beneath the balconies. 'Rid me of these Blood Angels. The rest of you…' He gestured to the thousands of mutants who filled the amphitheatre, a gaudy host of leering creatures so numerous that they blurred into a sea of colour. 'The rest of you ride north, to Volgatis! Let nothing stand in your way! Zorambus is waiting for you.' He held up the iron bolt hung around his neck. 'This will be our lodestone. A fragment of the Blade Petrific. A link to the Emperor's greatest weapon. Wherever we are, this icon will lead us to the Emperor's sword. Let your thoughts flow into the metal. Our course will become clear. Children of the Vow! Together, we will seize the Emperor's might and take it back to Him!'

The crowd roared wildly, but Antros wondered why Dravus even bothered mentioning the Emperor. It was clear he had shifted his faith to darker

gods, and the hordes of lunatics crammed into the amphitheatre would have leapt to join any slaughter he willed, without the pretence that the fight was a righteous one.

He looked at Mephiston, sure that Dravus' infuriating lies would drive him over the edge and unleash the Gift.

The Chief Librarian was watching his garish foe with calm dispassion.

Dravus' smile faltered as he saw how unruffled Mephiston was by his words. 'Go now!' he howled, jabbing his spear at the heavens and eliciting another wild roar from below.

The crowd poured towards the two gates that led out of the arena, but Antros quickly saw the reason for Mephiston's composure. Rather than flooding out into the city streets, the thousands of mutants piled up against the gates, forming a swaying crush of bodies. As they started to die under the weight of their fellow cultists, violence erupted across the amphitheatre – gunshots and howls rang out through the terraces.

'He's locked the gates,' breathed Antros.

+Captain Vatrenus locked the gates,+ said a voice in Antros' head.

Antros looked up at the broken statue and saw that Mephiston was looking directly at him.

+I had originally hoped to save these poor souls, but I see now that they were damned before I could act. I knew that the enemy was here, in the city, but my auguries were unclear. I did not realise it was Dravus himself. He doomed his people long before we arrived. Their torments will be brief, at least. The information I gained from Father Orsuf will ensure that much.+

Dravus' grin was entirely absent now and he was pacing back and forth, watching the mayhem below and then glaring at Mephiston.

He levelled his spear at the distant gates and spat in rage as his sorcery had no effect.

'How?' he yelled, lunging at Mephiston with his spear. 'How did you do this? Those gates have not been locked for centuries! They have no locks!'

Mephiston easily parried the blow, allowing Dravus to stumble past him, almost falling from the crumbling statue before he whirled around to face the Chief Librarian, his features twisted by a look of childish petulance.

'There are locks,' said Mephiston, dodging another spear strike. 'It's surprising what you learn if you read more than prayer books. The

existence of the locks was not the most interesting thing I learned about this building.'

The violence below was becoming more ferocious as the cultists at the centre of the amphitheatre continued pushing out towards the gates, unaware of the carnage they were creating.

Dravus howled in fury and jabbed his spear at Mephiston again. All of his grace had been stolen by anger. He struck so wildly that Mephiston was able to step aside and gently shove Dravus as he stumbled past, causing him to stagger and then fall from the top of the enormous shield, plunging down to the terraces below. His body detonated like a flask of wine as it crashed against the old stone, hundreds of feet below.

Mephiston did not even bother to look at the corpse; he looked instead at the object he had snatched from Dravus' neck as he fell – the iron bolt.

The cultists nearby howled in outrage but Mephiston continued speaking.

'History can teach us so much, if we allow it the chance to speak,' he said, his words lost on the heaving crowds below. 'This temple was built in tribute to a long-forgotten pantheon. The people of this world believed in many things we might now disdain, but their ingenuity cannot be denied.'

He nodded at the distant Techmarine, crouched in the upper reaches of the amphitheatre. Brother Gallus pulled a lever on the outlet pipe he was standing beside. The mechanism was so corroded that even the Techmarine's massive servo-arm strained to ratchet the arm down into its cradle.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a trickle of black liquid began coughing from the pipe. After a few moments, the splutter became a stream and then a thick column of oil that arced out over the toiling masses below.

'This is no amphitheatre,' said Mephiston, as the jet of oil smashed into the ranks of cultists, cutting black lines through the crowds and knocking hundreds of mutants off their feet. 'It is a beacon.' He looked up at the circle of faceless statues. 'A tribute to the ancient gods of this world.'

The oil was gushing from the pipe at such a rate that it was already spreading out through the crowds.

'Their names may be forgotten,' said Mephiston, aiming his plasma pistol at the quickly spreading lake of tar, 'but perhaps they will find some use for these wretched souls.'

He fired a single shot and, for a second time, the amphitheatre blossomed into flame. This was not a magical glow, however, transforming the crowd through sorcery; it was real fire, blazing white-hot as it ignited the thousands who were trying to reach the gates. Immense heat rushed up through the cup-shaped building and even Antros had to raise his hand against the glare.

Mephiston's voice crackled over the vox-network, speaking to all of the Blood Angels, both inside and outside the amphitheatre. 'We have a destination,' he said. 'Meet me at the city gates.' He summoned wings and launched himself up into the thick plumes of smoke rising from the fire. 'We leave for Volgatis in the hour.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

Even after years of discord and violence, Volgatis was unsullied by war. Only the most desperate souls would brave the wrath of its protectors. As Livia rode around the final bend of the treacherous mountain path, she reined in her horse, giving Dharmia a chance to admire the magnificence of the holy fortress. The convent knifed up from a spur of the mountain, hung out over a sheer drop, thousands of feet high. The bottom of the chasm was hidden beneath the clouds that drifted far below. The gleaming white talon soared up out of sight, but also plunged down into the mountainside, its myriad lights glittering in the dark like seams of gold. It looked like an ice blade, thrust into the mountain by a god.

Dharmia looked back down the moonlit path and saw the others riding up towards them. The men were all swaying in their saddles, exhausted by the furious ride and coated in a glittering layer of frost.

'Will they just let us in?' Dharmia asked, pounding her frozen arms, trying to recover some feeling in her limbs. She looked up at the pinpricks of light that covered the tower. 'Do Seraphim like unexpected guests?'

'They are Children of the Vow, just as we are,' replied Livia. 'Besides,' she said, nodding down the mountainside, 'they will be glad of the extra guns.' Livia was wearing her usual, sardonic smile, but Dharmia noticed it was not quite as convincing as usual.

Dharmia looked where she was pointing and saw the long, coiling snake of lights that lay across the plains. Pieter Zorambus was less than a day behind them and his army had grown even larger as he marched towards Volgatis, the new converts inspired by the miracle of Hesbon's wings. Dharmia guessed that the apostates now numbered several thousand.

Livia clicked the horse into motion and they crunched across the ice towards the gates of the fortress. The doors were hundreds of feet tall and the final approach was covered by an enormous portico. Rather than columns, the vast porch was supported by four colossal statues, each of them kneeling, heads bowed, with the gabled roof of the portico in their huge hands. 'The Seraphim will have heard of our losses,' said Livia as they rode into the shadows beneath the porch, 'and our refusal to join with the Unbegotten Prince. They will not question our loyalty. They will know what we have endured to honour the Vow, so it would not occur to them that we might wish to remove the blade.'

The gates were closed. They reached up into the night sky like another limb of the mountain, blocking out the stars as Dharmia and Livia rode towards them.

'We bring our faith and our guns!' cried Livia, rising up in her saddle as the others rode up behind them, gathering before the gates. 'We are Children of the Vow and we have come to preserve that which must be preserved.'

Her words echoed strangely around the gulley and there was no reply. Livia pursed her lips and glanced back down the mountain at the approaching army.

'The Emperor has seen fit to share your secret with us!' she cried, turning back to the gates. 'We understand your sacred duty. We will offer our lives to aid you.'

Lights flickered, high overhead behind the battlements. Then, with a roar of promethium, figures began hurtling towards them: winged, armour-clad warriors that screamed down the sheer, impregnable edifice with their bolt pistols trained on Livia and her men.

As they landed, Dharmia saw that their wings were just the ornamental cowls of jump packs, built of thick ceramite, the same as their polished black-and-white armour. The hard edges of their battleplate were softened by a flurry of crimson robes, stitched with complex tracts and litanies, and

bearing the fleur-de-lys symbol of their order. All of the Seraphim wore domed helmets that obscured their faces, apart from the leader, a towering, powerful-looking woman who strode towards them with her chin raised defiantly. Her power armour was even more decorated than her Sisters'. It was covered in purity seals, and gilt-edged phylacteries, hung on chains, clattered against her armour. Her bolt pistol was holstered, but she held a brutal-looking morning star in her hands, its thick iron chains filigreed with the same holy texts that adorned her robes.

As the woman approached, Dharmia gasped. She wore only a thin, gauzy veil, held in place by a golden circlet, and the face behind the veil was a crimson mass of scar tissue. The woman's skin had been entirely burned away, leaving her with the visage of a peeled corpse, complete with a brutal, rictus grin and staring, lidless eyes. The effect was made all the more disturbing by the fact that she had decorated her raw flesh with face paint: an Imperial aquila, its wings spread across her cheeks and its two heads arched over her lidless eyes. The white paint gleamed shockingly against the glistening burgundy of her face.

'Saint Ophiusa,' said Livia, dropping to one knee and waving for the others to do the same.

Dharmia dragged her gaze from Ophiusa's nightmarish face and stared at the rest of the Seraphim. They were figures of legend: an elite warrior caste, the bravest and best Divinus Prime had to offer, chosen by the distant lords of Terra to watch over the planet's most holy sites. Volgatis was said to house hundreds of the warriors and, after learning that the fortress contained the Blade Petrific, Dharmia no longer found such a claim so preposterous.

'You have a storm at your back, stranger,' said Saint Ophiusa. Her voice was a moist growl of ruined vocal cords. She sounded like an animal but carried herself with confidence and dignity.

Livia rose to her feet. 'It is a slightly smaller storm than it might have been, thanks to the sacrifice of my men.' Dharmia noticed that she suppressed the mischief that usually filled her voice, speaking with a tone she had not heard her employ before. It was soft and oddly beguiling. 'We could not save the fortress at Kobella, my lady, but we made the apostates pay heavily for their route to your gates.' She gripped her lasgun. 'My name is Livia and I offer you all the strength we have left.'

Saint Ophiusa looked past Livia at the ragtag group of militiamen that surrounded her. Every one of them carried a wound of some kind and their thick furs were tattered and bloodstained. Even without those signs of combat, their hardships would have been clear from their gaunt faces, burned by the glare of the snow and the exhausted droop of their shoulders. The thin, mountain air had robbed them of breath and they gasped as they walked. Their faces remained resolute, though, and they looked back at the Seraphim with expressions of grim determination.

The saint studied them in silence for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice sounded less ferocious.

'I have heard of your bravery at the battle of Kobella. We are the Order of the Hallowed Gate and it would be an honour to have you fighting at our side.' She lowered her mace and nodded at the army crossing the moonlit plains below. Even from this far there was no mistaking the shapes of tanks and heavy artillery, trailing dust clouds as they trundled after the columns of dragoons. 'Tomorrow's guests are not here on a pilgrimage.' She raised her voice, as though addressing the stars. 'We have been waiting for this test since before you were born, Livia, and we will face it with all the strength we have been given, but my visions are all clear on one thing – tomorrow will be a day of blood.'

Livia rose from her knee and stepped closer to the saint. 'I know what you house here, my lady, and I'm here to offer you a promise – those apostates will not touch the Blade Petrific while I or my men still draw breath. All we ask for is a chance to fight.'

Saint Ophiusa nodded. 'Those apostates were never in any danger of getting near the Blade Petrific, but your offer is gladly accepted.' She turned to the nearest of her Seraphim. 'Sister Superior Melitas will lead you to our dormitories. I advise that you spend what is left of the night in prayer. The morning will certainly bring you a chance to fight.'

At a signal from Ophiusa, engines and pulleys roared into life and the vast gates began to swing open, revealing a moonlit courtyard beyond and a complex of temples and shrines, all wrought in the same ossuary fashion as the rest of the planet's buildings. The Seraphim strode back through the gates, following Ophiusa as she marched off into the shadows, the jets of her jump pack still glowing as they cooled.

Sister Superior Melitas removed her helmet, revealing a gleaming white

bob and a stern, lean face. She had a fleur-de-lys tattooed on her cheek but there was nothing decorative about her appearance. Her gaunt features spoke of an iron-hard will and years of combat. ‘Stay close,’ she snapped. ‘Tomorrow the war reaches Volgatis and we will not be found unprepared.’ She gestured at the figures that were dashing back and forth through the buildings. Torches and braziers lit the bone-work grotesques and tortured colonnades of the convent. ‘Keep out of the way until morning and I will make sure you have a chance to prove your faith.’

She strode on beneath one of the colonnades, climbed some steps and led them into a bustling armoury, warmed by the heat of several braziers. Armourers were working and praying over an impressive array of weapons. ‘I doubt you could lift one of our bolt pistols,’ she said, patting one of the huge guns as though it were a beloved pet, but we have flamers and bladed weapons.’ She glanced at Livia’s men. ‘Some of you may be able to wield those. At the very least, the armourers can see to your own weapons.’ She grimaced at the state of their filthy chainswords and flails. ‘We must face our trials with dignity tomorrow.’ She led them past the weapons to a room crowded with thick coats and plates of flak armour. ‘For Throne’s sake, don’t let Saint Ophiusa see you in her battle lines dressed like that.’

Livia’s men stared in wonder at the piles of gleaming, sacred weaponry and armour.

‘First you must pray, though,’ said Sister Melitas. She scowled. ‘And bathe.’ She led them on to the dormitories – vast halls for bathing, sleeping and prayer. They were almost empty, with all the Seraphim outside on the battlements, preparing for the morning. There were a few priests and servants scuttling through the chambers, though, and Melitas called out for fresh bathwater and prayer mats.

Once they were clean and dressed to the satisfaction of Sister Superior Melitas, she led them to a chapel and left them to pray. Before she could leave, Livia placed a hand on her arm. ‘Sister Superior,’ she said, her voice so low that only Dharmia heard. ‘May I see the Blade Petrific?’

Melitas gave her a wary look. ‘Why?’

‘If we are to die in a few hours, I will never have a chance to see the place where the Emperor’s hand once rested.’ Her voice grew husky with emotion. ‘I will never have a chance to feel His presence on the air.’

The Sister Superior gave her a hard look. ‘His presence is everywhere.’ She patted the twisted mesh of fossils that made up the wall next to them. ‘This whole world was formed by His will.’

Livia gave Dharmia a discreet shove and the young girl moved forwards, tears glinting in her eyes. ‘I did so hope to see the Blade Petrific once before I died. I have heard such tales of it. Before they died, my parents told me that pilgrims who prayed hard enough heard the Emperor’s voice, resonating through the air.’

The Sister Superior looked sternly at Dharmia, unimpressed by her tears. Then she looked outside at the pre-battle rituals and the strange ballet of heavy ordnance swinging into place on the battlements. She shrugged. ‘I was preparing to pay tribute at the Ædicula Sacrum myself. I suppose there is no harm in you joining me. Only members of our order could ever reach the reliquary, but pilgrims are free to view it from afar.’

Livia frowned at the Sister Superior, speaking in the same soft tones she had deployed at the gate. ‘The Ædicula Sacrum?’

The towering warrior nodded. ‘The shrine that houses the Blade Petrific.’ She gripped Dharmia’s shoulder. ‘Perhaps it would be good for you to see what we are fighting for.’

She led them back outside onto the bitterly cold streets, leaving the men to their prayers. They climbed what seemed to Dharmia to be hundreds of sets of stairs as they headed towards the uppermost reaches of the fortress. As they climbed, Dharmia caught breathtaking glimpses of the mountains that surrounded them. Each time they turned a corner, she saw spines of snow-capped peaks, trailing away into the darkness, hazed by a mantle of clouds. After a while, the air became so thin that Dharmia could barely breathe and her head began to feel oddly light, as though it were tethered to her neck by string and might drift away at any moment. She staggered on and after nearly an hour they reached a structure at the very pinnacle of the convent.

The Ædicula Sacrum was another piece of ossified statuary – an enormous griffon. It loomed over the fortress, magisterial and proud, its vast wings spread out into the night and its feline body rearing defiantly over the top steps. One of its front claws was raised up at the sky, snatching at the stars, and the other was locked around the treasure it guarded: a rectangular vault, more intricately worked than anything

Dharmia had ever seen. The bones that made the vault had been sculpted and twisted in such a way that they resembled a roaring fire. It was as though the griffon had been frozen in the act of clutching an explosion of flames.

Seraphim were arrayed around the shrine, helmeted and clad in the same black-and-white armour as the Sister Superior. They all carried bolt pistols and at the sight of Sister Superior Melitas they clanged the guns against their chest armour in salute and stepped aside.

Melitas glanced back at Dharmia and Livia as she led them to the foot of the statue. Her face was still taut and severe, but the pride in her eyes was unmistakeable. She stopped them a few feet away from the top of the steps and indicated that they should approach.

Dharmia was so weak from lack of oxygen by this point that she had to lean against Livia, but she stumbled forwards and saw what Melitas was pointing at.

From the lower steps, it had looked as though one could climb all the way to the Ædicula Sacrum but she now saw that it had been an optical illusion. The feet of the statue were actually on a circular dais that was surrounded by a sheer drop.

'How do you reach it?' asked Livia, stepping carefully to the edge of the drop.

The Sister Superior smiled. 'You do not. Unless it is by the grace of Saint Ophiusa. Her voice alone can command the Ædicula Sacrum to extend its claw and bridge the mountain.'

Livia looked away, but Dharmia caught the look of irritation on her face. Clearly she had not expected this final obstacle to their prize.

The Sister Superior scowled at Dharmia. 'Kneel, child. You are a few feet away from an object that we know the Emperor once held.' She closed her eyes and reached out over the abyss. 'Feel His courage. Feel His wisdom.'

Dharmia did as instructed. She closed her eyes, pressed her head to the steps and began to pray. For a wonderful moment, she thought she really could hear a voice. Then she realised it was just the wind, humming across the mountaintop.

Later that night, as they whispered their final, pre-dawn prayers before the battle, Dharmia recalled the sound, wondering if there *had* been words,

just beyond her hearing.

'Remember,' whispered Livia in the darkness beside her, as she cleaned her laspistol. 'We are the not-a-morons. We are not going to die on this mountain. And we're not going to let Pieter Zorambus lay his oh-so-well-manicured hands on the Blade Petrific.' She gave her a crooked smile. 'I have a plan, General Dharmia.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mormotha, Divinus Prime

They called it a miracle, but Antros knew it for what it was: an abomination. As the Blood Angels emerged from the catacombs, back up onto the streets of Mormotha, a bright, clear dawn was breaking, revealing the sky fully for the first time since they had arrived on Divinus Prime. Antros paused at the top of some steps, high above the street, and stared at the scene overhead. It was Mormotha, reflected so clearly that he could make out every roof and spire in perfect detail, but the city in the sky was a nightmare of Mormotha, a world so tainted by madness that Antros' eyes began to hurt as he studied it.

In the Mormotha of the sky, silver-skinned serpents flickered between the crowds of priests, hundreds of feet long and carried on pale, translucent wings. Ossuary temples flowed like liquid, morphing constantly into new forms, the larger buildings swallowing the smaller ones before unfurling into new, even stranger shapes. And the priests who ran through this lunacy were distorted, elongated counterfeits of the priests below. As the city in the sky moved ever closer to the real city, its silent inhabitants were stretching and drooping towards reality, like droplets of paint, hanging from a frieze that was peeling away from the firmament.

Horrific though it was, Antros could not drag his gaze from the surreal scene overhead. He saw that, just like in the real city, there was a vast

amphitheatre, crammed with thousands of burning bodies but, in this likeness, the burning mutants were not screaming but dancing, revelling in the flames that were transforming their flesh. Rather than becoming blackened husks, their bodies were crystallising, growing glass-like as they cavorted and leapt through the fire. Seeing it so clearly for the first time, Antros realised that the mirror world in the sky was actually the past. The fires in the amphitheatre were only just taking hold. He was seeing the world as it was a few moments earlier. It was as though the reflection took a few minutes to assimilate the changes below and recreate them – there was a slight lag between the two versions of reality.

'Is it getting closer?' asked Rhacelus. He was standing beside Antros but his words were directed at Mephiston, who was standing a few feet ahead of them, further down the steps, studying the rusty bolt he had snatched from Dravus.

Mephiston secreted the bolt beneath his cloak and nodded. 'The reflection will soon devour the reality. I see now that this "Miracle" is intended to do more than simply hide Divinus Prime.' He looked up at the glittering figures in the sky. 'This world is being fractured and transformed by sorcery, and if I do not halt it soon,' he looked up at the undulating architecture above him, 'we will be walking those streets instead of these, and Divinus Prime will be lost forever, along with the Blade Petrific.'

'What will we do now, my lord?' asked Antros, looking back at the real Mormotha. The streets were flooded with wailing, grief-stricken priests who had not made it into the amphitheatre. Those that could get near had tried to break down the gates to save those within, but the stone would not give and all they could do was listen to the screams echoing through the walls. Most had no idea of the heretical transformations that had consumed their brethren; they thought that thousands of innocents were being burned alive.

'Dravus confirmed what I had already learned from Father Orsuf,' said Mephiston. 'The Blade Petrific is in Volgatis. But if Dravus was right, Pieter Zorambus is already at the gates. He will take the blade this very morning if we do not arrive to stop him.'

'My lord,' said Rhacelus, 'how far is it?'

Mephiston shook his head. 'Hundreds of miles to the north, from

memory, but I only glanced at the maps.' He nodded to the book he had given Antros when they left the abbey. 'Every shrine and temple is marked, Volgatis included. Take a look.'

Antros unclasped the book and leafed through the maps and illuminated texts until he found the word Volgatis. He traced his finger over the measurements on the map and shook his head. 'It's a convent of some kind. Heavily fortified. Built right at the peak of a mountain – the highest peak of the Tamarus Mountains. Nearly three hundred miles north of here.' He peered closer at the pages. 'Father Orsuf has made notes in the margins. The Order of the Hallowed Gate. And another word. I can't quite make it out. Seraphim, perhaps?'

Rhacelus glanced at Mephiston. 'Adepta Sororitas?'

Mephiston nodded. 'It makes sense. If the Ecclesiarchy place so much importance on this world, they will have stationed Sisters of Battle here to watch over it. Pieter Zorambus has half the planet at his back, though. Even the Adepta Sororitas will find it hard to hold out against such numbers. We need to get there fast. Mormotha has a space port. You probably saw it when we were up by the abbey. It is in this very district, not far from the amphitheatre. There looked to be aircraft there.'

Rhacelus nodded. 'If we fly we could reach Volgatis in minutes rather than hours.'

Mephiston spoke into his vox. 'Captain Vatrenus. Do not head for the gates. Make for the space port.'

'*Understood, Chief Librarian,*' came the reply. The captain's words were accompanied by a chorus of screaming blasts – the unmistakeable sound of las-fire.

'Have you engaged more of the mutants, Vatrenus?'

'*No, my lord, not mutants – just the local troops. They do not understand what happened in the amphitheatre. My explanation fell on deaf ears. I have–'* His words broke off and the sharp report of bolter-fire barked over the vox-network. *'The idiots think* we *are the enemy.'*

Antros looked down the steps and saw that the locals who were not fleeing from the fire were pointing in their direction, their faces twisted with grief and rage. There was a flash of gold as dragoons began spilling out of doorways.

Antros unholstered his bolt pistol, but Mephiston shook his head. 'I have

killed enough of these people for one day. They have been lied to, but not all of them are as wretched as the arch-cardinal. We should spare them if we can.'

Antros found it hard to lower his gun. The bloodlust that had consumed him in the amphitheatre was still there, hovering at the back of his thoughts. As he watched the dragoons approaching, their lasguns raised, he felt an overwhelming urge to storm down the steps and tear into them. He could almost taste their blood splashing into his mouth. He shook his head and recited the litanies of restraint he had learned as an acolyte, muttering the words as a mantra until he was calm enough to lower the gun and look away from the soldiers.

He clicked his data-slate from his armour and called up a schematic of the city. 'You're right. We are just a few streets away from the space port, my lord,' he said, waving to an avenue behind them that was clear of people.

Mephiston nodded for Antros to lead the way and they ran down the steps as gunfire lashed out from the nearby buildings, scattering chunks of architecture across the road as the Guardsmen's shots failed to find their mark or skimmed harmlessly off the Blood Angels' power armour.

After just a few minutes they reached the control towers and hangars of the space port. The structures were as intricately wrought as the rest of Mormotha – a spiralling mass of coiled fossils that looked to be completely deserted. There were dozens of aircraft dotted around in various states of repair, including some Valkyries, hunched in their hangars like enormous carrion birds, their fuselages painted a dull black and their wings seeming to sag under an impressive array of missiles and lascannons. Most of the aircraft looked battle-ready and in good repair.

Mephiston was already striding towards the hangars with Rhacelus at his side, making for a large, ancient-looking transport ship.

As Antros hurried after them, he saw a block of red power armour rushing towards them from the south side of the square. Captain Vatrenus and his men moved with the same martial discipline Antros would expect. Their armour was dented, scorched and drenched in blood, but none of them showed signs of injury.

Vatrenus saluted as he reached Mephiston, and the Chief Librarian turned to face him.

‘Captain,’ said Mephiston with a nod.

‘My lord,’ replied Vatrenus. He removed his helmet and his expression betrayed his annoyance. ‘I should not have cut things so fine. If you had explained to me why we needed to close those gates I might have–’

‘You might have what?’ interrupted Mephiston, genuinely confused. ‘I gave you a clear order, Captain Vatrenus. What difference would my reasoning have made?’

Vatrenus opened his mouth to argue, then caught Rhacelus’ outraged glare and simply nodded, muscles rippling across his clamped jaw.

Mephiston nodded at the transport ship. ‘We need to leave now.’

Captain Vatrenus looked up at the vehicle with a raised eyebrow. It was like an ugly, overgrown relative of the Valkyries in the other hangers and it had clearly seen better days. Sections of the armour plating had rusted away and the fuel tanks were hanging from the fuselage at a very unhealthy angle. Vatrenus turned to the Techmarine. ‘Brother Gallus?’

Gallus had been forced to fight his way out across the terraces of the amphitheatre alone, and his armour was more damaged than the rest of the Blood Angels, but he replied with a brisk nod. ‘Captain,’ he said, clambering up into the aircraft and heading for the cockpit.

As the transport ship’s thrusters roared into life, hurling it over the walls of the city, Antros gave Mormotha one last look. The flames were already spreading through the streets, sending great plumes of smoke up through the bone-spiral towers. The Labyrinth had become a funeral pyre.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

Commander Hesbon soared through an ice-sharp cloud, frost fixing his face into a grimace as he climbed higher. ‘You *will* fall,’ he said, his words as venomous as they were breathless. His wings pounded him through the tail of the cloud and revealed the dizzying landscape below. The Tamarus Mountains, jagged and brutal, clawing up into the sky and, clinging to the highest peak, Volgatis.

Hesbon glared at the fortress as he circled high above its battlements. It hung out over the valley like an outstretched limb, its walls glittering with muzzle flashes as the Seraphim launched volley after volley down onto Hesbon’s men. The narrow, winding road that led up to the gates of Volgatis was heaped with dead dragoons, and they had only begun the assault a few hours earlier. Hesbon had promised the Unbegotten Prince he would have the gates down by midday, but none of his men had even reached the feet of the statues that held up the cathedral-sized portico. The gunfire from the walls was merciless and the single path that led to the gates was completely exposed. It was a pitiful massacre. Even their tanks had been obliterated before they could get anywhere near the walls of the convent. They were now smouldering in the middle of the road, blasted onto their sides and leaking flames as the dragoons fell back under another pummelling barrage from the guns on the walls. Zorambus had promised

that reinforcements would come from Mormotha – an army big enough to topple Volgatis' walls; an army led by the arch-cardinal himself; an army that had never arrived.

Hesbon could see black-armoured forms dashing across the battlements, beetle-like and tiny from this height, as they gunned down his men. Every now and then, one of his soldiers would get within spitting distance of the huge porch and the defenders would drop down from the battlements, borne on screaming, winged jets and revelling in the ease of slaughtering the poor souls trying to lay charges at the foot of the statues.

He had tried to bring his own heavy guns to bear on the fortress but the second his men trundled them into view, the Sisters of the Hallowed Gate revealed another of their cowardly ploys. The walls of the crevasse on either side of the road looked to be nothing but sheer, unscalable granite but, every time Hesbon's guns moved within firing distance, hidden artillery boomed from the mountainside, blasting the weapons off the road. His great army was in tatters. The glorious victory he had imagined had turned into a shameful rout.

He looped lower, still out of range, trying to spot a weakness in the architecture of the convent, anything that could give him a last chance at victory. There was nothing. The outer wall was not bone but solid rock, and it seemed to have sprung into being, fully formed at the moment of the mountain's birth. Hesbon cursed and loosed off a few shots from his laspistol, knowing he was too away far to hit anything but too enraged to care.

His wings faltered as a horrific image filled his thoughts: a crimson, bloody face, covered by a white veil. The face wore a wide, lipless grin and it appeared to have no skin. The vision was so disturbing that by the time Hesbon had remembered the need to fly he had plunged halfway down to the battlements.

The Sisters of the Hallowed Gate saw him hurtling towards them and loosed off several rounds from their bolters.

Hesbon banked hard, swerving away from the walls, but not before one of the shots tore a ragged hole through his stomach, blasting straight through his flak armour. He arched in agony and fell from the sky towards the corpse-lined road below, dropping his pistol and clutching at the wound.

Through his agony, he retained enough sense to beat his wings before he

crashed into the mountainside. He skimmed over the ranks of his cowering troops and finally landed with a flurry of thrashing wings in the gorse bushes at the roadside.

Bolter shells thudded into the ground around him, hurling chunks of sod into the air, and Hesbon lurched to his feet, staggering behind a rocky outcrop for cover. Shots hit the rock, pulverising it and showering him in dust and chippings. He groaned and staggered off back down the road, barging through his men as his life poured between his fingers and shells exploded all around him.

The road looped around a shoulder of rock and he was out of sight of the fortress. Dragoons were staggering in every direction, hauling their dead and dying up the road, and clutching at their wounds. Even through the red haze of his pain, Hesbon was awed by the brutality of the scene. Corpses and burning tanks crowded the road for as far as he could see. Then blood loss and pain overcame him and he collapsed to the ground.

'Take me to the prince!' he gargled, as some of the men caught sight of his wings and realised who he was. 'Get me to Zorambus,' he groaned as the soldiers' faces merged into a smear of colours and shapes.

'You are a brave man,' said a kind voice as the world swam back into view.

Hesbon woke with a jolt as he recalled his stomach wound. He tried to sit, but realised he was strapped down to a bench. Pieter Zorambus was leaning over him, his tanned, weathered face creased into a concerned smile.

He gave a gentle laugh as he wiped Hesbon's sweaty hair out of his eyes. 'But attacking Volgatis alone may have been a little ambitious.'

Hesbon looked around. He was in the prince's command tent, but they were alone. None of the other officers were present and Hesbon presumed they were dead. There were a few books and data-slates next to the prince's cot, and a table covered with parchments and boxes. He looked down at his wound and saw, to his horror, that it was clamped wide open, exposing his steaming innards to the cold, mountain air. The skin around the opening was covered with the complex network of lines and symbols that had spread over his body. The symbols seemed to shift slightly as he looked at them, flowing into each other as if they wished to avoid his gaze. They radiated from the bloody hole in a complex sunburst.

Zorambus was still smiling compassionately and Hesbon was no longer in any pain, but as he tested his bonds, Hesbon felt a rush of fear. He noticed, for the first time, that there was something oddly flat and lifeless about the prince's eyes, as though they belonged to a different, crueller face than the one they were currently looking out of.

'My lord,' he said. 'My wound. Is it…?'

Zorambus gripped his hand and shook his head. 'Nothing to worry about, commander. I removed the shells and cleaned it myself.'

The prince smiled again, but now that he had noticed it, Hesbon was fixated on the idea that his lord was wearing someone else's eyes. Or some*thing* else's eyes. They were dead and inhuman. The idea filled him with a growing sense of terror.

'Then, am I healed?' he asked quietly.

Zorambus simply smiled, before wandering over to the table and opening one of the boxes.

'My lord,' gasped Hesbon. 'There was no way we could have reached the gates. There was nothing I could do. The men fought bravely but there was no cover.' His voice cracked. 'Where were the reinforcements? What happened to the army from Mormotha?'

Zorambus turned around with his hands clasped together, holding whatever he had taken from the box. His smile faltered at the mention of Mormotha. 'Dravus failed me.'

Hesbon's panic grew as Zorambus approached, the smile returning to his face. He strained against the straps again, but they were fastened tight. Suddenly he was sure that the prince meant him harm. He did not want to find out what was in his hands. He drew a breath to scream but, to his horror, he found that his mouth had vanished. His jaw worked furiously but there was no longer an opening. His skin was now stretched seamlessly over the lower half of his face.

Zorambus shook his head like a disapproving parent. 'No need to trouble yourself, Commander Hesbon. You did everything I needed and more.' He nodded at the carnage outside. 'The deaths of your men are exactly what I needed to complete your transformation.'

Hesbon howled behind his healed-up mouth, but the sound was too muffled to carry.

Zorambus reached the bench and peered into the open wound.

‘Remember what I said, Commander Hesbon – if we are to serve the gods, we must think like gods.’ He nodded at the tent door. ‘We have a vast army at our disposal. Your victories ensured that. But, even if you could reach those gates, how long would it take, commander?’ He paused, waiting for a response, then laughed. ‘Sorry, you can’t answer, can you? Well, let me answer for you, my friend – *too* long. By the time we entered Volgatis, the Blood Angels would have swaggered up here in their pretty suits and found a way to take what is mine.’ The gentle humour of his voice vanished, replaced by a furious snarl. Then he regained his composure. ‘However,’ he said, ‘if we think like gods, we see that there are other kinds of gate than simple stone doors.’ He touched the lines that covered Hesbon’s skin. ‘But even the most powerful practitioner needs help to pierce the walls between what is real and what is unreal. So many deaths, Hesbon!’ The prince’s eyes gleamed. ‘You have given me *so* many deaths today. All that pain. All those souls crying out together, here, where the Emperor made the boundaries so thin… The deaths of your men have given me just the chance I need, Commander Hesbon.’

He opened his hands and dangled something over Hesbon’s wound. Something that wriggled and writhed in his grip.

Hesbon stared at it in horror, unsure what he was looking at. It was an insect of some kind – a long, serpentine creature, clad in metallic scales. It looked like a silverfish, only several inches long.

‘I may have been a little disingenuous when I said the Emperor blessed you with those wings, General Hesbon,’ said Zorambus, dropping the silverfish into the open wound.

Hesbon strained wildly against his bonds as the cold, eel-like shape burrowed into his guts.

‘They *were* a divine gift, but the divinity involved is probably not one you’re familiar with.’

Hesbon could no longer feel the silverfish, but he could feel a sickening sensation emanating from the place where it had entered his body: an unpleasant churning, as though his insides had turned to liquid.

‘But what matters is that you have been touched by the Otherworld, my friend. Your soul has been made malleable, receptive to metamorphosis.’

As Hesbon jolted wildly on the bench, attempting to break the straps, Zorambus hurried back over to the table and opened another box. He drew

out a quill and a bottle of ink, and returned to his captive. ‘You will be my catalyst, general,’ he said, tracing carefully over the shapes drawn on Hesbon’s skin. ‘Your heroism will accelerate the change that Divinus Prime has been crying out for. Your sacrifice will mean an end to all this stultifying stasis.’

Hesbon moaned in horror as a blue, oily hump forced itself from his stomach.

‘You see,’ said Zorambus, stepping back, ‘I must be the first to reach the Blade Petrific. There is more at stake than you realise.’

The blue shape spiralled and rippled as it rose from Hesbon’s body. The pain seemed oddly remote, but he could see that his torso was breaking apart.

As it rolled and swelled, Hesbon began to make out its shape. It was like an enormous ray fish – flat, boneless, crescent-shaped, six or seven feet wide and studded with yellow eyes. As it slipped from his intestines, it drifted up into the air, as though floating in water, its wings or gills rippling like they were caught in a current. It hovered over Hesbon, turning to stare at him with banks of eyes, studying him with the same inhuman coldness he had seen in Zorambus. Then it opened its wide scar of a mouth, revealing cruel, shark-like teeth, and let out an ear-splitting scream. It sounded like a thousand infants, screeching simultaneously for food.

Behind his sealed mouth, Hesbon began to laugh. The sight of such lunacy slithering from his body, combined with the chorus of screams coming from its mouth, was too much for him. As his sanity deserted him, Hesbon decided that he was an air-fish too, just like the thing billowing above his head. He relaxed back onto the bench, laughing as more daemonic shapes slid from his broken body.

Zorambus sighed with pleasure, his eyes closed and his head thrown back. Then he continued writing studiously on Hesbon’s skin and a whole menagerie of blue-fleshed, monstrous shapes surged and whirled into the room, all screaming as they were born. After a while, there were so many of the daemons rolling and swaying around the tent that it collapsed, spilling the nightmarish things out onto the mountainside.

By the time Hesbon’s mind finally crumbled, he was drifting in an ocean of blue, shimmering flesh, barely aware that Zorambus was laughing

ecstatically as he ordered the screaming daemons into battle. Hesbon knew his sanity had finally deserted him because of the man who had appeared behind Zorambus. Despite everything he had witnessed in the last few minutes, he still knew this newcomer could not exist. The man was small and skeletally thin. He was dressed in plain black robes and could have passed for a simple monk were it not for the glimpse of his head, just visible in the deep folds of his pointed hood. It was the long, cruel-looking skull of a raptor, with black, empty eye sockets looking out from each side. It was not the strangeness of the monk's face that horrified Hesbon, though; it was the oddness of his movements. He approached in a series of dislocated flickers, like a collection of old photographic slides played on a broken projector. He flickered and shuddered towards Zorambus, shedding multiple images as he moved, creating dozens of likenesses, like a double exposure. One of his arms ended in a grasping, bird-like talon, and the other arm was a silver serpent, coiling and hissing as the monk winked in and out of reality.

Hesbon tried again to scream and this time he strained so furiously that his skin began to tear, creating a new mouth.

Zorambus grew pale as he saw the monk and gave him a deep bow. 'My lord, I hope you are enjoying the performance this time.'

'The game is over and begun,' replied the monk. His voice registered in several octaves at once, from a subterranean rumble to a shrill, barely perceptible shriek. 'The blade is seen, unseen. It is almost in reach.'

Zorambus looked horrified. 'Livia's in the fortress?'

'She has reached the shrine.'

'No,' whispered Zorambus, glancing out through the tent doors at the battle outside. 'No!' he cried, grasping a clump of his own hair as though he were about to scalp himself. 'It's me, my lord. It has to be me. That girl cannot serve you. She is a fool.'

'A fool that will beat and has beaten you to the prize,' rumbled and screamed the monk.

'Never!' cried Zorambus. He rounded on Hesbon and howled a torrent of incomprehensible words. Hesbon exploded as daemons clawed their way through his flesh, screaming towards the fortress.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

Volgatis shuddered, its halls and crypts shaking with the rolling boom of gunfire. Even in its deepest vaults, where only the most senior Sisters were admitted, the walls trembled and groaned, as though cursing the assault. Stones clattered from the ceiling as Saint Ophiusa hurried down a convoluted series of passageways, muttering prayers as her flickering torch lit the way. She nodded curtly at a pair of sentries who were watching over the door to her cell. They stepped aside and admitted her to the chamber, and she slammed the door, bolting it securely from the inside, checking the locks several times before she turned around.

Her cold, joyless cell was almost entirely empty. The damp, stone walls were unadorned and there was hardly any furniture. She made the sign of the aquila across her chest and kneeled before a shrine that dominated the austere room, lighting a small candle on its scarred surface. It was a simple metal table on top of which a crude carving of a man had been placed. The wooden man had wings and a sword. Ophiusa had painted most of the effigy dark red, using her own blood, but the face was a white mask with two bloody thumbprints for eyes.

‘Astra Angelus,’ said the saint, her eyes glinting with tears. ‘You are so close now. After all these years, Mephiston, you heard me. And you came. Through the stars you came.’

She threw back her veil and the candlelight washed over her ruined face as she stared intently at the wooden man, listening for an answer.

As always, it took a few moments, but she was patient and, slowly, the little statue started to move. It clicked and jolted like a mechanical toy, creaking spasmodically into life. It lurched across the surface of the metal table and fixed its bloody eyes on her.

'Of course I heard, Ophiusa. Prayers charged with such purity could cross a dozen galaxies. I heard every word, as clearly as if you were whispering them in my ear. The God-Emperor Himself assured me you would not fail. And now, your work is almost complete. I will reach you in a few hours and everything we have strived for will be realised. All thanks to your devotion and bravery.'

Tears poured down the raw flesh of Saint Ophiusa's face. 'The apostates have not reached anywhere near the gates. Nor will they. We will easily hold them off until you can reach us and claim the blade.'

The wooden man reached out, juddering and trembling as it touched her clasped hands.

'Your faith must hold a little longer, Ophiusa,' it said.

'What do you mean?' Her breath came in faint gasps. 'I will do anything. Whatever you need of me, Lord Mephiston. What do you require? Just tell me and it will be done. There is no sacrifice I will not make. I would–'

'I require nothing that you are not already doing, my child.' The wooden man waved at the trembling ceiling as it shed more dust into the little room. 'I just wanted to give you a warning. The battle will not be as brief as you think.'

She frowned. 'Those Guardsmen are barely worthy of our guns, Astra Angelus. I do not believe even one of my Sisters will fall. We will drive them into the abyss with ease, my lord. Their heresy has robbed them of sense. An army like that could not hope to challenge Volgatis. It is madness. They are dying in their hundreds. That army will not survive the morning.'

'I would expect no less of the Adepta Sororitas,' said the wooden man. 'But I am not talking about those dragoons. It is not the Guardsmen that will test you, but what follows.'

Ophiusa was about to ask a question, but then she shook her head, raising her chin proudly. 'I fear nothing, Astra Angelus. We will hold these gates

until you arrive, whatever the apostates throw at us. When you reach Volgatis, I will be waiting, as I promised.'

'I know it,' said the wooden man. 'As I always did. We dream, dreaming, dreamed.'

Ophiusa frowned. 'Dream, dreaming, dreamed? What does that mean, my lord? Is it a prayer?'

'Nothing,' replied the little doll, shaking its head with a brittle snapping sound, seeming annoyed by its own words.

Ophiusa moved back from the table a little, sensing something unfamiliar in the statue's voice. A cold shadow passed through her mind, as though she had almost recalled something that she had hidden from herself. The wooden man's words had planted a worm of fear in her stomach, but she could not give the fear a name.

'You are afraid?' asked the doll. 'It would be understandable. The Emperor and I have asked, and will ask, a lot of you, holding out here as the rest of the planet succumbs to madness. I know and knew that the battle ahead will test you greatly. If you wished or wish it, I could pass this burden on to another.'

Ophiusa stiffened. 'No!' she cried, her doubt vanishing. Then she lowered her voice. 'No, Astra Angelus, I am *not* afraid. Do not lose your faith in me now – now that we are so close. I will keep calling to you until you have the Blade Petrific in your hands. I will keep calling to you as I have done for all these years.'

The wooden man nodded. 'Truly, you are and were divine, Ophiusa, as I know and knew. Do you remember the day that we first met?'

Ophiusa smiled. 'Of course. I thought I was damned. I thought I was tainted by those unnatural wounds. And then you appeared.' Her voice trembled. 'And you showed me the way to salvation.'

The wooden man nodded. 'You burned away your own skin. What greater proof of your purity could the Emperor require? How could there be a taint of corruption in you if you had the bravery to torch the mark of Chaos from your own body?'

'You saved me,' she whispered.

'You saved yourself.'

The walls shook again, more violently than before, and Ophiusa glanced up at the cracking ceiling.

‘It is time,’ said the wooden man. ‘I wish we could talk for longer, but the true test is almost upon you now. Lead your Sisters to glory, my child, and soon we will meet.’

‘Lord Mephiston,’ she whispered, shaking her head in wonder. ‘Soon we will meet.’ She stood, dusted down her armour and nodded. ‘Until then.’

‘Until then,’ replied the wooden man, as Ophiusa rushed from the cell.

The door slammed and the candle flickered, throwing the doll’s shadow across the stone walls. The wooden man was lifeless once more, but its shadow continued moving, even after the flame had settled. It coiled and rolled, then formed into a slender, hooded figure – a monk, with a talon-like beak jutting from his hood. He laughed quietly to himself, his voice a chorus of whispers and growls. ‘We dream, dreaming, dreamed,’ he said, struggling to contain his amusement. ‘But infinity comes.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

Dharmia laughed as the guns on the walls launched another volley of las-blasts. She was high on the battlements, watching the Unbegotten Prince's army disintegrate on the smoke-shrouded road below. The Sisters of the Hallowed Gate had finally achieved what so many others had failed to do: they were showing the apostates that the God-Emperor would not tolerate their backsliding heresy. Dharmia had spent the last year watching powerlessly as Pieter Zorambus and his lies had destroyed her home and her people. Now the oathbreaker would pay.

'This is what comes to those who deny the Vow!' she howled, leaning out over the embrasure. 'This is the Emperor's judgement on those who forget their promises!' As she cried out, tears welled up in her eyes. Since being rescued by Livia, Dharmia had masked her pain and grief behind a nonchalant grin, attempting to match Livia's carefree cynicism, but now, as she saw her family's killers receiving their just rewards, emotion boiled out of her. 'Traitors!' she screamed, hurling rocks at them as the tears rushed down her cheeks.

Saint Ophiusa was nowhere to be seen, but Sister Superior Melitas was striding up and down the battlements, barking out orders at the Sisters manning the guns. She heard Dharmia over the gunfire and paused to look at her with pride. She nodded and gripped her shoulder. 'A liar can only

hide his true nature for so long. Pieter Zorambus was never more than a thief. I hear his speeches were all very grand, but this is where his deceit ends. The Vow must never be forgotten. The Blade Petrific must never fall into the hands of such men.'

One of the Sisters cried out, further down the wall and Sister Superior Melitas strode off to investigate.

Dharmia backed away from the wall, feeling a rush of shame as she considered why they had come to Volgatis. The Sisters were pummelling the apostates. Perhaps Livia was wrong? Perhaps the blade was safest where it was?

She looked around and saw that Livia was standing just a few feet away, watching her with the same crooked smile she always wore. They had both allowed the Sisters to dress them in new armour and coats, but however smart Livia's clothes were they could not mask the rakish swagger that had so impressed Dharmia when they first met.

Livia sauntered to her side and leant on the battlements, giving Dharmia an encouraging wink.

Dharmia had the unnerving sensation that Livia had read her thoughts.

'I saw how you looked when she spoke to you,' said Livia, running a hand over the icy stones. 'You think I'm making a mistake.'

'No,' said Dharmia. She gripped Livia's arm, horrified by the suggestion. She looked down at the massacre before the gates. 'It's just that the Sisters seem so sure that they will defeat Zorambus. Their faith is so strong.'

Livia smiled and placed a kiss on Dharmia's forehead. 'Faith,' she said. 'Wonderful and dangerous.' She looked at the dragoons, falling back through the mounds of corpses, screaming with the agony of their wounds. 'Do you think those men lacked faith? Do you think they threw themselves against these walls without thinking they had the Emperor on their side?'

Dharmia shook her head, confused. 'They're apostates. They believe in Zorambus. They think the Blade Petrific should be taken away – away from Divinus Prime.' Her voice grew hushed with horror. 'Away from the Children of the Vow.'

Livia nodded. 'They are fools, and it is *faith* that has made fools of them.'

'Then is it wrong to believe? Surely we must have faith?'

'Faith, yes. *Unquestioning* faith, no.' Livia nodded at the Sisters as they

unleashed another deafening barrage of gunfire, shaking the walls with the force of the las-blasts. ‘The Seraphim are blinded by their belief. They think faith is their armour, but it is a trap. They cannot conceive of a foe that could breach these walls. They see men and tanks, and think that is all Divinus Prime has to throw at them.’

Livia stooped so her face was level with Dharmia’s. ‘Faith is fine, as long as it is tempered by thought.’ She raised a mischievous eyebrow. ‘And perhaps even a little self-interest.’

A piece of the battlements broke free, hit by a lucky las-shot, showering them both in dust. Livia laughed. ‘If we don’t look after ourselves, Dharmia, who will?’

As always, Dharmia found Livia’s laugh irresistible and she grinned back at her.

‘Your parents had faith,’ said Livia, looking serious again. ‘We need more than that.’

Dharmia nodded and was about to apologise again when Livia pointed through the battlements. ‘I hope the Seraphim *do* hold these gates, but the matter is far from decided.’

Dharmia peered through the columns of smoke and fire, struggling to see what Livia had pointed to. In the distance, where the mountain road turned a bend and plunged from view, there were flashes of blue in the smoke – fitful splashes of colour, as though some kind of toxic chemical were being burned.

‘At the very least,’ said Livia, ‘the Sisters of the Hallowed Gate are about to become very busy, so this is our chance. I want to be out of here, with the Blade Petrific, before we find out whose faith is strongest.’

Dharmia was only half listening, distracted by the blue shapes rising in the distance. As they rolled and tumbled towards the fortress, she started to make them out a little clearer. Her stomach lurched as she realised they were creatures. Some were rippling, fish-like things but others had no clear shape, morphing and inverting as they drifted closer. It was not so much the shape of them that caused her to cry out in horror; it was the horrible noise they were making. It sounded like thousands of people screaming at once, and the sound seemed to come from some other reality. She sensed that something unnatural had leaked into the world, something dredged from the forgotten recesses of her nightmares.

‘Come,’ said Livia. ‘We need to reach the *Ædicula Sacrum* quickly.’

They moved away from the battlements and, as they went, Livia waved for the men to follow. Abderos and the other militiamen were also dressed in new coats and plates of flak armour but, like Livia, a new outfit could not disguise their true nature. Their scarred, tattooed faces and hulking, muscle-lashed frames marked them out as the brutal zealots they were. Most of them had even refused the offer of new weapons, preferring the rusted chainswords and battered flails they had arrived with.

Livia led them all down the steps that zigzagged through the inside of the convent’s fortified wall. The wall was so high that it took them nearly ten minutes to reach the courtyard below. Seraphim rushed past them, loading guns and drawing chainswords as they made for the wall, snapping orders and responses with a new sense of urgency. Dharmia heard the distorted sound of the Sister Superior as she ordered the whole garrison to the walls.

Livia led them on through the crowds of warriors, in the opposite direction to the flow of bodies. No words were needed; they all knew this was the chance they had been waiting for. Something big was happening at the walls – they heard explosions and howls of pain. No one was thinking about Livia or her zealots. They raced past the temples and dormitories, and reached the stairs at the rear of the complex that the Sister Superior had shown them when they arrived.

They pounded up the steps, dodging the Seraphim who rushed past them. As they climbed higher, they could see across the tops of the buildings to the battle on the walls. Dharmia paused, staring in shock. The blue-skinned sky-sharks were whirling from the smoke and latching onto the Seraphim in a terrifying feeding frenzy. She saw one of the Sisters staggering backwards, enveloped by another monstrous thing: a rolling, boiling nest of limbs. It was covered in flames and teeth, and it was tearing the Seraphim apart as she reeled, then fell from the walls. As the Sister of Battle tumbled from view, Dharmia heard her screaming in agony.

Abderos was a brute of a man, clad in unshakeable faith, but his eyes were wide as he looked at Livia. ‘By the Throne,’ he muttered. ‘What are they?’

‘Zorambus’ sorcery,’ cried Livia, turning to look back down the steps at them. ‘He has conjured those monsters to kill us. Move!’

They hurried on, but the higher they got the harder Dharmia found it to breathe. As they climbed way above the convent, with the mountains spread around them in every direction, the air became thin and elusive, battling with Dharmia as she tried to snatch it down into her lungs.

Behind her, vast flocks of the daemons were now assailing the walls of Volgatis. Every Sister in the convent had gathered on the battlements, firing desperately at the amorphous horrors that were jiggling and rippling over the ancient stone. Fires had broken out in several places and most of the gun emplacements were now smouldering heaps of warped metal. Dead Seraphim lay all across the battlements, torn to shreds by the frenzied, inhuman attacks. The victory that seemed so assured when Dharmia stood on the walls now looked to be slipping out of reach. She shivered in disgust and continued climbing.

By the time they reached the top steps, she was on all fours, clambering desperately towards Livia as she turned to wave them on.

Even with all the madness that had overtaken the walls, there were still a few sentries standing watch over the Ædicula Sacrum. Most had rushed to join the defence of the wall, but a row of heavily armoured Sisters remained at the edge of the precipice, watching over the shrine that was lodged beneath the enormous, stone griffon.

They raised their bolters as Livia approached, but then they tilted their heads and Dharmia heard words crackling from the vox-links in their helmets.

'Are you Livia?' demanded one of the women, lowering her gun.

Livia nodded, and Dharmia saw how she was struggling to suppress her perpetual smile.

The sentry sounded hesitant. 'Sister Superior Melitas orders you and your men to watch over the shrine while we aid our Sisters at the wall.' She clearly found it hard to believe what she was saying and she made no sign of moving away from the top of the steps. 'Can this be true?' she muttered, turning to the other Seraphim.

'No,' said a voice from the shadows at the side of the steps. 'No it cannot.'

Livia drew her laspistol as Saint Ophiusa stepped out of a rocky alcove, holding her morning star in both hands, as though testing the mace's weight.

‘There is more than one deceiver on this mountain,’ growled the canoness, her voice a liquid slur. The raw meat of her face twisted into a snarl so furious it was even visible through her veil. ‘That was not Melitas speaking to you, but this witch.’

Livia laughed in disbelief. ‘Witch?’

Saint Ophiusa circled her, adjusting her grip on the morning star. ‘I should have seen it sooner, but all my thoughts were focused on your fellow sorcerer. At least Pieter Zorambus had the honesty to attack me openly.’ Anger contorted her voice. ‘Rather than pleading sanctuary and then attempting to stab me in the back.’

‘Witch?’ whispered Dharmia, looking at Livia in confusion.

Livia shook her head with a despairing expression, rolling her eyes at the accusation. ‘I am not here to fight you, Ophiusa,’ she said, waving the pistol. ‘I am here to protect that which you’re unable to protect. Look!’ she cried, anger entering her voice as she waved back at the walls. Whole sections of the battlements were now ablaze and a great tide of blue and pink shapes was pouring into Volgatis. Other daemons were gliding through the smoke, their rippling fins revealing rows of foot-long talons as they dived to attack. ‘You are not worthy of this prize!’ Livia cried, pointing at the casket beneath the griffon. ‘The Blade Petrific is not safe with you!’

Saint Ophiusa made a low growling sound and strode across the steps towards Livia, drawing back her morning star to strike.

‘No!’ howled Dharmia, leaping to defend her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Divinus Prime

The transport ship banked hard, screaming through the clouds. Every part of it was rattling and clanging as it dived towards Volgatis. Antros wondered which would come away first, the wings or the tail fins.

Captain Vatrenus sat with the Techmarine, Gallus, at the front of the cockpit. Gallus punched the controls with what seemed to be arbitrary violence and klaxons barked as they hurtled towards the ground. A jet of smoke whistled from somewhere near Antros' head.

'Volgatis in three minutes,' muttered Rhacelus, strapped into the seat beside Antros.

Mephiston grunted a curse, sounding in pain.

'My lord?' said Rhacelus, looking over at the Chief Librarian.

Since they had left the ground, Mephiston's tremors had grown worse and every few seconds trails of dark lightning would crackle across his skin, and his eyes would cloud over with blood. He was clutching his left arm constantly. The higher they flew, the more violent the tremors became.

'Should we land?' asked Rhacelus. 'We will reach the fortress in moments.'

'Something is coming,' said Mephiston, staring at the floor of the cabin. 'Ready the guns,' he said. 'We will need–'

Something heavy slammed into the side of the transport ship.

A new set of klaxons started blaring as the aircraft rolled onto its side.

'Throne!' growled Gallus, struggling to grip the controls as part of the dashboard tore free.

'What was that?' asked Antros, staring through the armoured glass.

The air was a riot of colour; pink and blue shapes were spiralling all around them.

Another weight slammed against the fuselage, then another.

'Daemons!' snapped Gallus, triggering a barrage of las-blasts.

The cockpit lit up, and Antros saw liquid blue shapes disintegrating all around them, ripped from the sky.

There was a tearing sound from beneath their seats as another of the daemons thudded into the ship.

Lights flashed on the controls. 'Two minutes to Volgatis,' said Gallus.

More daemons smashed against the hull and this time, some of them managed to latch on. Something hammered against the transport, right beside Antros. Then a pink, heaving mass smashed through the fuselage, reaching out towards him. Its face consisted of gaping, incisor-crammed jaws, snarling and slavering in its flesh. It thrashed furiously from side to side, trying to bury its teeth into Antros' face as he held it at arm's length. It was clutching a long, ornate blade and drew it back to stab at him.

Antros recited a passage from *The Glutted Scythe*. Lightning pulsed through his hand, ripping the daemon's face apart. It screamed wildly and flew back, but as it tumbled away it hauled Antros with it.

He cried out, shocked by the daemon's strength as it wrenched him through the broken fuselage and out onto the wing of the aircraft. A mortal man would have been hurled to his death, but Antros gripped one of the wing's exposed ribs, hanging on, even as the aircraft howled up through the clouds.

The daemon drew back its sword to strike but Antros called out another invocation and blasted it apart.

Antros reached back towards the hole he had been wrenched through but, before he could drag himself through, he saw that the remnants of the daemon's flesh had slapped down on the wing, reformed into blue-skinned daemons that were equally as grotesque as the one that had birthed them.

They threw themselves at Antros with a peevish, whining sound, mouths opening in the centre of their contorted chests.

Antros caught the first daemon in his fist and pummelled it onto the wing with a flash of psychic energy. This time he scorched it into a blackened husk, avoiding any further rebirths.

The second daemon thudded into him and they both crashed back inside the aircraft.

Antros sprawled across broken seats as the whining daemon thrashed and lunged at him, talons and blades clattering against his power armour.

Rhacelus' sword came down through its neck and crimson fire lashed across its shifting flesh, lighting it up in a dazzling display of sparks.

The daemon fell back and Antros booted it through the hole, sending it plunging through the clouds. Then he lay still for a moment, breathing heavily as the transport ship lurched and juddered beneath him.

Another series of blows struck the aircraft and more of the windows broke, filling the cabin with noise and fumes.

'We won't make it,' said Mephiston, raising his voice above the din. 'Two minutes is too long. Climb,' he said.

Gallus yanked the controls back and they sliced up through the clouds with the daemons screaming up after them.

'When shall I level out?' cried Gallus, struggling to be heard. Ahead of them was the mirror image of Divinus Prime that filled the heavens. Antros could see clouds and the transport ship reflected as they had been a few minutes earlier, before the daemons attacked.

'Keep climbing!' shouted Mephiston.

'My lord,' Gallus sounded surprised. 'Into the…?'

Mephiston nodded.

As they approached the Miracle, Antros felt the urge to hold his breath, as though they were about to break the surface of a lake.

Then they were through.

Sound vanished. The klaxons, the screaming wind, everything; it all stopped, enveloping the transport ship in silence.

Antros laughed as ideas exploded in his mind. A thousand revelations hit him at once.

'Dive,' whispered Mephiston.

Brother Gallus did not respond. He had the same dazed expression on his face as Antros. 'Everything…' he muttered, shaking his head and frowning.

Captain Vatrenus cursed and leant over, grabbing the controls and shoving them into a dive.

Fury boiled through Antros as he realised Vatrenus was about to rob him of the wondrous insights that were blossoming in his mind. He leant forwards to wrestle the controls from the captain's grip.

He was too late. Deafening reality exploded around them once more. The klaxons and turbulence seemed all the more cacophonous after the silence of the Miracle.

'We've reached Volgatis,' said Brother Gallus, confused, looking at the controls.

They were surrounded by mountain peaks and directly in front of them were the soaring gates of Volgatis.

They were about to smash straight into them.

Brother Gallus yanked the controls but there was no way they would clear the wall. The battlements hurtled towards them, crowded with battling figures and lit up by dozens of raging fires.

Mephiston cried out in a language Antros did not recognise, and time slowed to a crawl.

They should have smashed into the battlements but, instead, they were surrounded by a torpid blur of crawling shapes.

Mephiston was clutching something in his fist and Antros realised it was the object he had snatched from Dravus. He was studying it closely. Then he looked up at the hazy outlines outside the ship. 'We will have to be quick.' He looked around at the other Blood Angels. 'The impact will be slow, but no less lethal if we are crushed between the wreckage and the wall. Follow my lead.'

They all nodded and, a few seconds later, the ship began to shudder and groan, crumpling towards them, concertina-like, in slow motion. It was as though it were made of paper and someone was carefully folding it away.

'Now,' said Mephiston, opening his door and stepping out into the smear of colours.

Antros and the others followed. The world was an abstract collage in which nothing made sense, but Antros was relieved to feel solid ground crunching beneath his boots.

They took a few steps and Mephiston indicated that they should crouch. Then he turned back to the collapsing transport ship and spoke again in the

obscure tongue he had used earlier.

The world regained its usual momentum with a scream of tearing metal and boom of exploding fuel tanks.

Heat washed over Antros and he saw that they were crouched near a gun emplacement at the top of the wall – a gun emplacement that was now crushed beneath the blazing wreckage of the transport ship that they had just rammed into the fortress. The scene was so chaotic that the crashed aircraft was barely noticed. Every inch of the fortifications was crowded with battling figures. Not far from the Blood Angels, Seraphim were pouring down from a watchtower towards the walkway at the top of the wall, jump packs roaring as they hurtled towards a heaving throng of daemons, their bolt pistols blazing.

The daemons bounded over the battlements and sprinted forwards, gibbering ecstatically, oblivious to the ferocity of the Sisters' gunfire. A forest of pink limbs and flaming tentacles slapped across the stones, some landing only a few feet away from Antros.

As the Sisters of Battle landed on the top of the wall, they drew chainswords and hacked into the daemons, finally halting their advance not far from the smouldering wreckage of the transport ship.

Captain Vatrenus and the rest of the Blood Angels rushed across the walls to join the Sisters as Antros and Rhacelus strode through the fire and surveyed the scene. The Sisters were being enveloped by countless horrors but they held their ground, hacking into the waves of daemons with no sign of fear or hesitation.

As the Blood Angels fired careful, precise shots into the fray, the Seraphim raised their voices, singing wild, amplified hymns as they tore into the daemons.

Antros and Rhacelus raced to join their brothers, their weapons blazing into life as they crossed the wall.

It was only as they crashed into the enemy that Antros realised that there was no sign of Mephiston.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

There was a resounding clang as Abderos blocked Saint Ophiusa's morning star with his chainsword. One of its iron balls still thudded into Dharmia, but Abderos had taken the force from the blow. Dharmia toppled back down the steps, winded, but unharmed.

She saw Livia draw her laspistol, her face rigid with fury, and fire several shots at Ophiusa.

The blasts tore holes in the walls but Ophiusa was already gone. She moved with remarkable speed, bounding across the steps and leaping, swinging the morning star round her head, bringing the balls hurtling down towards Livia.

Livia swayed to one side and the mace smashed into the steps, scattering fossilised bone and filling the air with dust.

The Seraphim at the edge of the precipice strode forwards, raising their bolt pistols and opening fire on Livia and her militiamen.

Abderos grunted as bolt-rounds slammed into him, tearing his body apart and scattering the pieces across the steps.

Two other militiamen flew backwards, hit by the gunfire. A third managed to return fire with a lasrifle, gouging the chest armour of a Seraphim but she barely noticed, cutting him in half with a few well-placed shots.

A brutal massacre began as the Sisters mowed the militiamen down at point-blank range. Dharmia cowered beneath one of the steps as the storm of shots rang out.

Livia barrelled into Saint Ophiusa and the pair of them clattered away down the steps. The Seraphim calmly lowered their smoking guns and resumed their places, unwilling to leave the reliquary.

Dharmia dashed after Livia and Ophiusa, drawing her only weapon – a knife she had taken from the armoury. Livia and Ophiusa had come to a halt further down the steps, on a balcony looking out over the miles-high crevasse. Ophiusa swung back her morning star but before she could land a blow, Livia punched her hard in the face, jolting her head back with such force that her veil tore loose and drifted down into the abyss.

Livia seemed to hesitate at the sight of Ophiusa's brutalised face. The pause was enough for the saint to smash the morning star's handle into Livia's jaw, sending her sprawling back onto the steps. Livia landed, dazed, and Ophiusa hefted back the morning star to pulverise her head.

'No!' cried Dharmia, leaping at the saint and crashing into her.

The force of the impact sent them both tumbling over the railings of the balcony. They plunged towards the valley floor, thousands of feet below, turning and wrestling as they went.

There was an explosion of heat and noise as Ophiusa fired her jump pack. They jolted violently to a halt, but Dharmia was tangled in the harness and managed to hold on as Ophiusa hurtled across the chasm and flew back up to the balcony.

Ophiusa gripped her by the throat. 'Apostate!' she hissed.

Dharmia tried to reply but Ophiusa's armoured grip was crushing her windpipe and her head started to spin.

Dharmia jammed her knife beneath the plates of the saint's armour. Ophiusa gasped and loosed her grip, howling in rage and clutching at the blood that rushed from her stomach.

They crashed back down onto the steps, rolling, punching and cursing. As they came to a halt, Dharmia wrenched herself free, staggered backwards and clutched her throat, gasping for breath. Her vision became shot through with stars and she collapsed.

As she lay there, her lungs burning, staring at the mirror Volgatis that filled the sky, Ophiusa loomed over her. The saint had lost her morning

star but she had drawn a bolt pistol and, as she approached, she levelled it at Dharmia's head.

There was a scream of las-fire and Ophiusa jerked forwards, showering Dharmia with blood as she slapped to the ground.

Livia was standing a few feet away, her pistol still raised, the muzzle glowing. There was no sign of her habitual smirk. She looked at Dharmia with a mixture of confusion and shock. 'You saved me,' she muttered.

Dharmia tried to smile, despite her pain. 'I'm no moron,' she managed to say, wincing at the agony of using her bruised vocal cords.

Livia kept staring at her with the same confused expression. Then she shook her head and held out her hand. 'We don't have much time.'

As Livia hauled her to her feet, Dharmia saw that the steps further up were littered with corpses of the militiamen, all of them torn apart by gunshots and lying in the surreal, unnatural poses of the dead.

'I know you are not a moron,' said Dharmia, still gasping. She grabbed Livia's arm. 'But what are you?'

Livia looked away. Then she raised her chin and looked back at Dharmia defiantly. 'I am your friend. And I will not let any of these fools hurt you.'

'What *are* you?'

Livia scowled, grinned and then shrugged. 'Damn it, Dharmia, do I have to say it? Yes, I am everything you have been taught to fear. It's true. Call me a witch, if you like. I have learned such wonderful things that the God-Emperor would have me burned alive for my temerity. I believe in knowledge and learning and change…' She hesitated. 'And I believe in the only god who does not forbid such things. The Weaver of Fates, Dharmia. The Keeper of Secrets. The Changer of Ways. Tzeentch. The Schemer. The Trickster. However you want to label him, he is the source of my power and my *freedom*.'

Dharmia did not recognise the names but they fell from Livia's lips with such passion that her pulse quickened in response. She realised what had drawn her to Livia in the first place. She had sensed this mystery in Livia, this great difference from the start, and she wanted to be privy to whatever wonderful secrets had empowered her friend.

She was too breathless to speak for a moment, then she nodded at the griffon statue at the top of the steps. 'You said you had a plan – a way to reach the Ædicula Sacrum. But how would we get past those Seraphim?'

Livia stared back at her. ‘You don’t want to flee?’

Dharmia held her gaze.

Livia hesitated and waved at the corpses. ‘I was using you all, Dharmia. I do not really care about this world. It’s all just a game. I care about me.’

Dharmia kept looking at her.

Livia cursed and then laughed. ‘And now I care about you.’ She gave her a sly grin. ‘Yes, I have a plan. I always have a plan.’ She turned and crept across the steps, keeping out of sight of the Seraphim further up.

Dharmia looked out over the sheer drop. It was a dizzying view. The valley floor was so far away she could see eagles drifting way below her, circling the glinting rivers and white, dusty plains.

‘How will we–?’ she began, then stopped, hearing a snapping and clicking sound behind her.

Livia was wrestling with a corpse – one of the dead Seraphim.

‘What are you doing?’ gasped Dharmia.

Livia staggered to her feet, swaying under the weight of the Sister’s jump pack. She grinned at Dharmia, her face purple with the effort of holding the thing. ‘Help me with this would you, General Dharmia?’

Dharmia rushed to grab the mass of polished ceramite, gasping under the weight of it. ‘You won’t be able to work it,’ she said.

Livia gave her a coy smile. ‘“Witch”, remember.’

They hefted the thing onto Livia’s back and, just as she was about to collapse under the weight, Livia muttered a series of fluid, unfamiliar words.

Dharmia backed away in surprise as light flickered in Livia’s eyes, then rippled across her skin.

Livia stretched and sighed, as though waking from a long sleep, then stood as easily as if she were carrying nothing.

‘What did you *do?*’ asked Dharmia, unable to hide her fear.

Livia shrugged. ‘I’m a witch and Ophiusa was a saint. The witch wants to keep you alive – the saint tried to unload her gun in your face. They’re all just words.’

A chorus of brittle screams filled the air and shadows washed over the steps.

Dharmia howled in disgust as a squall of rippling blue shapes tumbled towards them – flat, shark-like daemons, filling the air with dazzling,

rainbow-coloured vapour trails and opening their mouths to reveal rows of knife-like teeth. Their yellow eyes were rolled back in their sockets and they were all trembling with bloodlust.

'Damn you!' howled Livia and loosed off a volley of gunshots. Her aim was true and the first of the daemons exploded into radiant flames, but the rest continued screaming towards them.

Livia closed her eyes and the light blazed brighter beneath her skin. The jump pack's jets roared into life and lifted her up from the steps. She swooped low and hauled Dharmia out over the chasm.

'Damn you, Zorambus!' cried Livia as whole schools of daemons flooded towards them from every direction.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

Volgatis was burning. Flames of every hue had spread across the battlements, dancing over corpses and hanging in the air, dripping from the smoke as though reality itself had been set alight. The garish fumes were almost indistinguishable from the screaming daemons that were spiralling through the tumult. Antros tumbled and staggered through this explosion of noise and colour, his bolt pistol barking at the myriad horrors that surrounded him, spewing shells and death. The daemons were not his only problem. As he fought he was being dragged along the top of the walls, wrenched by powerful currents of aetheric power.

The warp storm hauled him up onto the top of a collapsed section of wall and as he rose out of the fumes, he caught a brief glimpse of the battle spread out around him. The walls were crowded with battling figures, but all of them, Seraphim, Blood Angels and daemons alike, were caught in a furious psychic storm. And at the eye of the storm, Antros found what he had been searching for: Mephiston. He stood above the gates, arms spread, fingers splayed, surrounded by a tornado of lightning and blood. Daemons of every conceivable colour and shape were hurtling towards him, caught in the crimson vortex. Mephiston was silhouetted within a fierce, bloody corona, a single point of darkness at the heart of the violence.

Antros dug his heels in the rubble and managed to hold his place. Bones,

corpses and daemons rushed past him as he tried to make out Mephiston's face. It was like trying to stare into a black sun. The darkness burned and blinded, making it impossible to see whether the Chief Librarian was still in control of his actions, or consumed by the Gift.

A shriek of giggles alerted Antros to the daemon that was bounding over the ruins towards him. It was a pink jumble of body parts, scampering on eight limbs like a spider, then six, then two, as its body morphed and flipped into a confusing variety of shapes. Only its face remained constant: hideously elongated jaws, quivering hysterically as it hurled a gobbet of pink fire at Antros.

He loosed one hand from the wall and cried out a word of warding, causing the missile to explode seconds before it hit him. The force of the blast rocked him back on his heels and kicked him from his perch, throwing him into the fury of Mephiston's tornado.

Antros cursed as he rolled and tumbled across the wall, smashing through the rubble with the giggling daemon scuttling after him.

He slammed into a column and managed to grip it, halting his freefall through the clouds of blood. He braced himself with one hand and extended the other one, palm outwards, towards the daemon.

It gambolled through the air towards him, laughing hysterically and drawing back one of its many hands to hurl another ball of warpfire.

Antros howled an evocation. Lines of energy crackled down from his psychic hood and along his extended arm, becoming a white-hot blast that tore from his palm and hurtled towards the daemon's face.

The daemon's head vanished before the blast hit, and reappeared on its side, still giggling, as its body formed into an O shape, allowing Antros' blast to ripple uselessly over the wall behind it.

Sprouting even more limbs, the daemon grabbed a bent girder and hurled itself at Antros, crashing into him like a sack of thrashing eels.

Antros fell back, caught once again in the currents of Mephiston's conjuration.

He rolled across the ground, the daemon latched on to him, pummelling his face and chest with its fists and stabbing a serpentine blade into the mask of his helmet.

The daemon's sword was not made of any real, physical material and it cut through the unbreakable ceramite of Antros' faceplate. Fumes and heat

washed over his face as the daemon's blade raked through his jaw, rending muscle and bone with a flash of pain. Pain suppressants kicked in immediately but blood rushed from his helmet, filling his eyes, blinding him as the daemon's teeth shredded bone and ceramite.

Antros wrenched the thing off his face and held it at arm's length, blood spraying from his ruined helmet.

They were still tumbling through the air towards Mephiston but Antros managed to grab his combat knife and jam it between the daemon's eyes.

The daemon continued laughing until Antros summoned a wave of cleansing fire into the heart of the blade. The psychic flame pulsed inside the daemon's head and incinerated it from within.

Antros continued crashing and clattering across the battlements, trailing blood from his broken helmet and the daemon shrieked and tumbled to the courtyard below, thrashing wildly at its own face as it tried to extinguish the flames. By the time it hit the flagstones it was little more than a burned husk.

Antros jolted to a halt, jamming his feet into the rubble and looking around. Volgatis was littered with dead Seraphim. The Adepta Sororitas had been almost entirely overwhelmed by the daemons. He scoured the walls for sight of a living Seraphim and could only see a few, huddled in small groups, blasting at the warp horrors with the same well-drilled accuracy they had shown in the first hours of the battle, but unable to see through the psychic storm. There were no more than a few dozen of them left alive, but none of them showed any sign of fear or doubt.

He saw Blood Angels firing too, but they were also scattered and divided – caught in the blood storm emanating from their Chief Librarian.

He yelled into his vox. 'Squad Seriphus?'

'*Lexicanium Antros?*' came a reply over the vox-network. '*Is that you? This is Captain Vatrenus. We are–'* Vatrenus broke off and there was a crack of bolter fire, followed by daemonic shrieks of laughter. '*Wretched warp spawn. Yes, I'm with Squad Seriphus. We're pinned down by this damned storm. Can't reach you. Can't–'* He broke off again to fire more shots. '*No sign of Squad Hestias. Are they with you?'*

'No,' replied Antros.

'Is this the daemons' magic?' gasped Vatrenus.

'No. Mephiston's.' Antros was unsure what else to say.

‘*Hold your position,*’ said Vatrenus. ‘*We will get to you.’*

Antros was about to reply when the air exploded with movement and noise. A storm of the screaming, shark-like daemons rippled through the fumes, their jaws gaping as they dived towards him.

He blasted the first with a thunderbolt so powerful it broke the daemon in half, the pieces slamming back into the second and causing it to spin off into the smoke.

The third hit him, hurling them both back onto the battlements.

He fell on his back with the daemon thrashing on top of him. Both his hands were locked on its jaws, trying to hold them at bay, but the daemon was charged with warp energy and the teeth were bearing down on his already-wounded head. He chanted obscure, Baalite phrases, opening his mind to the same invisible currents that were powering his attacker. Strength ripped through his muscles and he rose to his feet with a howl, smashing the daemon to the ground. Then he drew his bolt pistol and tore it into pieces with a deafening barrage of shots.

Dozens more of the daemons sliced towards him through the smoke, but Antros was so enraged he relished the chance to face more of them.

He was almost disappointed when a wall of muzzle flashes erupted in the smoke to his right. The daemons disintegrated, leaving just a final, wounded wreck for Antros to stamp his boot on and execute with a few rounds from his bolt pistol.

A Sister of Battle strode through the rubble towards him, her gun still smoking. She was battered, bloody and surrounded by her dead Sisters, but she saluted Antros calmly.

‘Son of Sanguinius,’ she yelled over the din of battle. ‘The Astra Angelus. Is he here?’

‘Astra Angelus?’ Antros asked, surprised. ‘Confessor Zin used that name. I did not think it was known here.’

They ducked as a series of las-blasts detonated the wall behind them.

‘We know who the Astra Angelus is,’ she cried, struggling to be heard. ‘We understand why you are here.’

More Seraphim stumbled through the storm towards him and gathered around her, looking at Antros. ‘Where is your lord?’ she asked.

Antros waved them on and clambered through the wrecked aircraft, trying to lead them through the psychic tumult towards the Chief Librarian

at its heart.

He dragged himself over another piece of shattered wall and they looked down on Mephiston. He looked like something from one of Zin's tales. Colossal arcs of power were coursing through the skies, knifing down from the clouds and flashing across the frozen crowns of the mountains, all of them terminating at Mephiston's upraised arms.

'The Lord of Death,' said Antros, awed by what he was seeing. As the lights connected with Mephiston, they flashed out across the steep-sided valley. Hundreds of crimson strands, a network of lethal blood magic, each thread skewering a daemon. The Chief Librarian was the nexus of a vast web of energy, linking him to every warp entity within sight of Volgatis. Most of them were gathered beneath the huge porch that led to the gates, between the feet of the giant statues, and, as Mephiston's magic tore through them, they were rooted to the spot, juddering and twitching as the blood consumed them.

The air was buckling under Mephiston's wrath. More crimson threads lashed out through his fingers, piercing the pink, giggling daemons on the battlements. A dome of red power spread out over Antros' head, slashing through hundreds of malformed silhouettes and fixing them in place.

Antros loosed his grip on the walls and gave himself to the gravitic pull of the blood storm. He bounced and crashed over the icy battlements until he was near enough to see the Chief Librarian better. Some of the Sisters managed to follow, gripping tightly to the embrasures as they battled with the furious current. Then Antros crawled over a shattered lintel and managed to get near the top of the gates, close enough to see Mephiston's face as he began the next stage of his rite.

Mephiston remained utterly calm. His battleplate was chipped and splattered with daemon-filth, but he was completely in control of his powers. He closed his extended hands, clenching them into fists, and as he did so every daemon held by his blood lightning crumpled and snapped. The screams shifted in pitch to something desperate, rather than rapacious, and the inhuman giggling broke into staccato, confused bursts that sounded more like choking than mirth.

As Mephiston's fists closed completely, the daemons imploded, sucked from reality like water whirling down a hole.

Then there was quiet. No screams. No gunfire. Everything ceased. The

only sound left was the gentle moan of the wind, rushing across the frozen peaks.

The psychic force that had been dragging Antros towards his lord ceased and he fell backwards, wrong-footed by the sudden absence of resistance. He landed in a mound of blood-slick rubble and saw that Mephiston had lowered his hands and was staring out across the corpse-strewn valley.

Every one of the daemons had vanished, but a newcomer was emerging from the distant banks of snow. It was a warrior in gleaming white plate riding bareback on a massive snake-like creature that had gaudy wings and a long, bird-like head.

+He is more significant than I thought, more powerful than I thought,+ said Mephiston in Antros' head.

'You have defeated his army,' said Antros, confusing those Sisters near enough to hear him. 'What can he hope to achieve now?'

+He is not merely a sorcerer. He is the plaything of something far more powerful.+ Mephiston's tone grew urgent, passionate even. +This is about more than just the blade. I see it now. I see why I have been called here. Someone wanted me to know of this. Someone wished me to see him here – to be at this battle. It was fated.+

As the Unbegotten Prince rode his serpent across the crimson-splashed ice, he showed no interest in the mounds of slaughtered Guardsmen that clogged the road. Rage boiled through Antros. Every one of those men had died believing they were fighting for the Emperor. Pieter Zorambus had dazzled them with lies and happily watched them all die. He was wearing the same welcoming smile he had shown in Tarn Abbey.

Antros stood up and unholstered his bolt pistol.

+He will crush you,+ said Mephiston. +And I have yet to understand what you are to me. Wait, Lexicanium Antros.+

There was a crunch of breaking rocks as the Sisters clambered to their feet. Antros whirled around, gun raised, to see Rhacelus striding towards him through the falling snow.

The veteran had removed his helmet and there was shock in his eyes as he saw what had been done to Antros' face.

'You need an Apothecary,' he said, grimacing. 'You are a disgrace.'

Antros laughed. 'Your concern is touching.'

Rhacelus raised an eyebrow, then turned to watch the scene taking place

at the gates. More of the Seraphim staggered out of the smoke to look. Antros noticed that there were pitifully few of them left to revel in the banishment of the daemons. And those that had lived to see it were all carrying shocking wounds.

The Unbegotten Prince rode towards the gates at a leisurely, menacing pace and Mephiston showed no sign of attacking, so the warriors gathered on the battlements followed his lead, holding their fire and allowing him time to approach and call out.

'Old friend!' cried Zorambus, grinning at Mephiston. Then, noticing the stern, defiant faces of the Seraphim, he laughed, waving at the Chief Librarian. 'Don't you realise who he is? What he wants? We're both just players in the same game – the great game. He is here to steal your great prize as much as I am. What do you think he'll do if he wins? Do you think he'll leave you as you were?'

Zorambus' smile faltered as the Seraphim continued staring at him with the same determined aggression.

'You knew?' he said, frowning. 'You knew he had come to steal the blade and you still chose to fight alongside him?'

Silence rang out from the gates and Antros studied the faces of the Seraphim nearest to him. None of them showed any trace of surprise.

Zorambus' face started to twitch with the effort of suppressing his fury and he began sweeping his sword from side to side as though preparing to strike an opponent.

'Pathetic,' he sneered. 'After all your talk of vows and faithful service.' He continued swinging his sword, then jabbed it at the mirrored sky. 'Do any of you know what this Miracle means? And it is a true miracle. Not one of those parlour tricks performed in the name of that mouldering corpse on Terra.' Zorambus dropped from his steed, waded through the piles of fallen dragoons and hauled one up to face him. The man's side was a bloody mess, but a gasp of pain echoed round the silent valley, revealing that he was still alive. 'What do you think you died for, dead man?' he spat.

The man tried to pull away, horrified by the transformation of his prophet.

Antros grabbed his bolt pistol, but Rhacelus gripped his arm and shook his head, nodding at Mephiston. The Chief Librarian was leaning out over

the battlements, staring intently at Zorambus.

Zorambus gave the dragoon a fierce, backhanded slap. ‘Tell me what you were fighting for!’

The man cursed and spat blood in his face. ‘For the Vow. To stop these unbelievers hiding the Emperor’s power from Him. To free the Blade Petrific so that it could be used to purge the galaxy of–’

‘No!’ howled Zorambus, with a snarling, delirious laugh. ‘No, you did not! You were a piece in a game. No, not even a game,’ he laughed. ‘A joke!’

The man frowned, confused, but Mephiston nodded. He did not cry out but let his voice be carried by the psychic storm still howling through his bones. ‘A competition.’ He looked up at the reflection overhead. ‘You hid Divinus Prime just so you could play a game.’

‘Oh, but you’re good!’ laughed Zorambus. He looked at the Seraphim. ‘He pretends to be surprised, but who do you think was my competitor in this game?’

Some of the Seraphim standing near Antros glanced at each other, their stern expressions faltering slightly.

Zorambus gave Mephiston a nod of grudging respect. ‘You played well, brother. I will give you that. I notice the canoness is not here. I presume you killed her first?’ Then he hurled the dragoon to the ground and waved his sword in a dismissive gesture. ‘Not that it matters.’ He gave his sword another couple of swipes and Antros and Rhacelus glanced at each other in belated recognition. Zorambus was drawing a rune in the air with his sword.

‘Leave the walls,’ said Mephiston, looking at the Seraphim who were surrounding him.

Some of them started to respond, but others looked at him with doubtful expressions.

‘Where *is* Saint Ophiusa?’ muttered one of them.

Others shook their heads. ‘I haven’t seen her since the Astra Angelus arrived.’

‘Now!’ cried Mephiston, leaping from the walls, wings forming at his back.

‘Zorambus was buying time,’ growled Rhacelus, turning to the nearby Seraphim. ‘He was stalling, preparing some kind of–’

A scream rang out as Zorambus plunged his sword into the chest of the wounded soldier he had been tormenting.

Mephiston was soaring through the air, his aetheric wings spreading wider as he dived. Vitarus was in his hand, pulsing with hunger.

Zorambus smiled as he raised his own, bloodied sword.

Mephiston smashed into Zorambus with such force that they tore a channel into the road. Mephiston raised Vitarus to strike but Zorambus slipped from his grasp, morphing into a wisp of light that reformed a few feet away, his expression flitting from grin to snarl and back again.

Mephiston rolled onto his feet and levelled Vitarus at the sorcerer's head. The blade jolted and spat liquid fire. Zorambus barely had time to raise his own blade in time to parry the flames. He staggered backwards over the corpses, sneering as the blast forced him to the edge of the road.

'Too late!' he laughed, glancing at the walls of Volgatis. A subterranean groan started to judder through the fortress.

The Seraphim standing near Antros and Rhacelus looked at them warily, making no move to go.

Rhacelus stared out at the huge portico that led to the gates and sneered in annoyance. 'Go,' he snapped to the Seraphim.

The Seraphim remained where they were, watching Rhacelus with doubtful expressions.

'You're about to die,' he said, as though speaking to errant children. 'Volgatis is coming down.'

The Seraphim looked around as understanding dawned on them. The enormous edifice was quivering and juddering, shedding bones, mortar and clouds of dust.

Rhacelus grabbed Antros' arm as cracks spread across the walls. 'You will need your wings, Lexicanium.'

Antros looked down at the sheer drop and nodded.

Finally understanding the danger, the Seraphim began leaping out into the banks of snow, flame kicking from their jump packs as they dived away from the two Blood Angels.

As he followed Rhacelus up onto the parapet, Antros saw the scale of the spell Zorambus had cast.

The enormous statues that held the portico aloft were rising from their kneeling positions and straightening their backs. There were six of the

stone colossi, sixty or seventy feet tall, with features worn away by the ages and empty sockets for eyes. As Antros and Rhacelus prepared to leap, the statues stood erect and shrugged off their centuries-old burden, tearing away the face of Volgatis like a paper mask.

The mountainous structure boomed, spewing stone and ash as though hit by a warhead. The valley echoed with the sound of its collapse and thunderheads of smoke billowed across the road, mingling with the falling snow.

The two Librarians leapt into the void as the battlements fell away from beneath their feet. Antros conjured sanguine wings and dived, blind, into the tumbling clouds, followed by a storm of rocks and the screams of collapsing architecture.

He lost sight of Rhacelus as he flew and as the ground loomed suddenly out of the miasma, he barely had time to break his fall. He staggered as he landed, stumbling across bodies and the burned-out chassis of tanks.

He whirled around and saw the six stone goliaths, vague silhouettes, towering overhead. The enormous golems waded into the explosion of rubble and hammered the walls with their tank-sized fists, trampling the ancient buttresses and columns with their feet. The noise was incredible, amplified by the acoustics of the narrow valley to an apocalyptic roar of white noise.

Antros watched in amazement as Volgatis fell. ‘The Blade Petrific,’ he muttered, his words drowned out by the convent’s death throes.

Lights pulsed in the smoke and Antros stumbled off through the dust, gripping his bolt pistol.

Mephiston was standing on the turret of a wrecked tank, his hand raised to the heavens. Above him, spinning in a sphere of blood, was Zorambus.

As Antros approached, he saw that Mephiston’s armour was riven with hairline fractures, a tracery of black lines covering his battleplate. In places, the armour had splintered away, revealing flesh that was fading into darkness.

Antros staggered to Mephiston’s side, unbalanced by the violent tremors shaking the chasm. The disloyal doubts that had plagued him on Baal resurfaced as he watched the Chief Librarian quivering and sparking like a piece of kindling. There was something almost daemonic about him.

Mephiston’s expression was still as obdurate and unyielding as it had

been on the battlements. Whatever the Gift was doing to his flesh, it had not overcome his will. Antros shook his head, trying to rid his mind of doubt.

'The blade!' he cried, struggling to be heard over the fury of Mephiston's blood magic. The crimson cage he had spun around Zorambus was crackling like a massive force weapon, causing the surrounding air to judder and grind. Zorambus was hacking at the inside wall of the sphere with his falchion and each blow flashed with psychic power, but the sphere simply stretched to swallow the impact. With every failed slash of his blade, Zorambus howled in outrage.

Mephiston looked briefly at Antros with a quizzical expression.

'Volgatis!' cried Antros, jabbing his staff at the tumbling walls and the rampaging golems. 'He's destroyed it!'

Mephiston hesitated as he took in the epic scale of the destruction. He lowered his hands for a second, forgetting about his captive.

Zorambus seized the moment and hacked with renewed fury at the ball of blood that contained him. His falchion sliced through and the sorcerer gushed from the red sphere, slapping onto the road in a gout of blood, his armour now as red as Mephiston's. Gore drummed down onto his back but he managed to stand, slipping and staggering away from Mephiston, using his sword as a crutch.

Mephiston looked from the tumbling walls of the fortress to Zorambus and then back again.

'So we both lose,' laughed Zorambus, between coughs and splutters. 'The Blade Petrific will–'

Zorambus' eyes widened as a shimmering sword blade slid out from the middle of his chest. He stumbled forwards, sliding along the length of blade and revealing a stern-faced Rhacelus standing behind him, still clutching the crackling sword.

'There's losing and there's *losing*,' said Rhacelus, drawing back his sword for another blow.

Zorambus grinned, then disintegrated – collapsing into a torrent of silver shapes that splashed across the ground.

Rhacelus curled his lip in distaste as serpentine, insectoid creatures spilled across the rocks towards him. They looked like overgrown silverfish and as they reached Rhacelus they flooded over his armour,

thrashing and shivering as they sought gaps between the layers of ceramite.

Mephiston looked back from the destruction of Volgatis and levelled Vitarus at Rhacelus. The blade hurled a blast that danced over the silver shapes, crumpling their segmented abdomens and turning them to ash.

Rhacelus staggered backwards, thrashing wildly as the shapes scurried across his chest, pounding them into pulp with his free hand and raising his force sword with the other.

Antros swung his staff and added his warp fire to Mephiston's, surrounding the staggering shape of Rhacelus in a nimbus of psychic flames.

The silverfish moved with incredible speed and Antros howled a warning as some of them reached Rhacelus' exposed neck.

Mephiston strode forwards, still calm, and made a slicing gesture with his free hand, scattering more of the silverfish. He was about to jab Vitarus again when a shape hurtled through the fumes and crashed down a few feet away, scattering rocks and tearing open the wall of snow and fumes.

Mephiston froze as a Seraphim lurched and weaved towards them out of the whirling clouds. It was Saint Ophiusa. Her power armour was drenched in blood and there were ragged holes torn in the ceramite. Her veil was gone and her flayed, crimson face stared out of them from the white landscape. She was gasping in pain, clearly near to death, but there was a wild ecstasy burning in her eyes as she looked at Mephiston.

'Astra Angelus,' she hissed, dropping to her knees, smoke trailing from her jump pack. 'The moment has come! Providence and prayer… brought you… here. Brought us together. You answered my… prayers.' She glanced at the destruction taking place behind them. The huge golems were smashing through the walls of Volgatis, tearing down buttresses and towers. 'I kept the blade safe for you. There is still time.'

Rather than looking at the golems, Mephiston stared at Saint Ophiusa. 'The vision was you?' he said. '*You* summoned me here?'

She looked confused. 'Of course. You know I did.' She stepped closer, frowning and reaching out to him, her voice trembling. 'We prayed together. I would not presume… to summon… one such as you. But we agreed that…' She shook her head. 'But you *know* what we have done.' She touched her face. 'You saved me. You know that we are–'

Rhacelus let out a strange choking sound and staggered away from them, clutching at a hole that had appeared in his chest armour. His eyes were wide with surprise as he looked at Mephiston and Antros.

'I…' he began. Then his words trailed off as his skull began to ripple and sag, like it was a sack full of liquid rather than hard bone and brain matter.

'Gaius!' snapped Mephiston, raising his sword, but hesitating to strike.

Rhacelus grasped his head in his hands and bent over double. Then he stood upright and looked at them. His scowl was gone, replaced by an amiable grin that had no place on Rhacelus' face.

Mephiston and Antros watched in horror as he stretched his limbs with feline pleasure and sighed. Rhacelus looked physically unchanged – but they knew they were facing Pieter Zorambus, clad in a suit of Blood Angels power armour.

'Impressive…' said Zorambus, lifting Rhacelus' sword. 'Antiquated, but impressive.' He dropped into a relaxed fighting stance and beckoned Mephiston forwards.

'Astra Angelus!' gasped Saint Ophiusa, dropping onto the snow with blood pooling around her. 'He's tricking you! Ignore him! Remember what you must do. Go now. To the fortress! His fellow sorcerer… She is at the Ædicula Sacrum.' Her voice became almost incoherent as she fell back, blood filling her mouth. 'He's tricking you. Can't you see?'

Mephiston was not looking at her. Blood rolled across his eyes as he saw what had been done to Rhacelus. The blood poured down his cheeks like tears and the cracks of dark fire simmering across his armour began spitting across the rocks.

Mephiston staggered as Vitarus exploded into flame and a violent tremor rocked the mountainside.

'My lord!' cried Antros, as Mephiston strode towards Zorambus, drawing back his flaming sword. 'The Blade Petrific!' Remember why we came!'

Mephiston was gone, consumed by the Gift. As he brought his sword down towards Zorambus' face, the road tore itself up from the ground, wrenched free like iron drawn to a magnet. Vitarus clattered against the sorcerer's falchion, hauling several tonnes of rockcrete in its wake, burying Zorambus in a cloud of dust and rubble.

'Gaius!' roared Mephiston, summoning his wings and launching himself into the air, hovering over the plumes of dust.

Zorambus tumbled back across the mountainside, shocked by the ferocity of Mephiston's blow.

Mephiston drew Vitarus back again and the ground rose up once more, whirling around the blade like a pennant of rocks.

Zorambus cried out in frustration and summoned gaudy, glittering wings of his own, soaring to safety just before Mephiston slammed another landslide onto him.

Antros looked back at Volgatis. The golems had demolished the walls and were now wading through the streets, trampling down temples and punching through statues. Seraphim whirled around them like carrion crows, but their bolter fire was useless, punching holes through the ancient stone but doing nothing to slow their advance.

There was another tremorous boom as Mephiston and Zorambus clashed blades again.

Antros was hurled back through the dust and landed on the road, towards the fallen gates of the fortress.

'I will find it!' he yelled, sprinting towards Volgatis.

The duel taking place behind him was heaving the mountainside back and forth beneath his feet and he staggered as he ran. As he neared the wreckage of the portico, the ground was also shaking under the pounding of the golems' feet. He vaulted rocks the size of tanks and reached the courtyard. Corpses lay everywhere – Seraphim and Hesbon's dragoons, sprawled over the shattered ruins. Seraphim and Blood Angels were hunched in the rubble, firing up at the giants looming overhead, as other Sisters looped and dived through the fumes.

Antros clambered over a toppled wall and grabbed one of the Seraphim by the arm, turning her to face him. 'The Blade Petrific!' he cried, raising his voice over the cacophony. 'Where is it?'

Her helmet was gone and she glared at him. 'What have you done with the saint?'

'Do not dare,' roared Antros, overcome by fury, 'to question the motives of a Blood Angel!'

She gasped and pulled away, clutching at his hands, trying to free herself from his grip. As she struggled, her eyes alighted on the distant statue of the griffon, high up at the rear of the convent.

Antros nodded and loosed his grip.

‘What are you?’ she demanded, staring at him in horror, blood trickling from her eyes.

Antros gave no answer and raced off through the rain of falling debris, leaping through the mayhem and running towards the steps.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

‘It has to be me!’ howled Livia, terrifying Dharmia with the ferocity in her voice. There was no irony in her tone now, just naked fury.

As the jump pack’s thrusters roared beneath them, Livia drew a strange-looking knife and brandished it at the few daemons that were still circling them. Most of the screaming, shark-like things had been obliterated moments earlier – destroyed by the lines of blood fire hauled from the heavens. The crimson flames had skewered, then imploded the daemons, dragging unexpected cheers from Livia and Dharmia, but the few that remained were still intent on blocking their return to the stone griffon.

Livia whispered a long stream of syllables and it sounded to Dharmia as though she were speaking backwards – the words were a torrent of convoluted gibberish.

The knife flickered in response to the words and Dharmia saw again how misguided she had been about Livia. This was sorcery. There could be no other way to describe it. As Livia continued muttering, the light in the blade grew so fierce that Dharmia had to look away. Then, with a final word, Livia slashed the knife through the air and the light sprayed out in a rippling semicircle towards the daemons.

As it collided with the daemons’ blue, undulating bodies, the light passed through them. The sky was bisected by a scar of blue-and-pink flames,

then, when the glare faded away and the sky was seamless once more, the daemons were gone.

'It has to be me!' hissed Livia, boosting the jets of the jump pack and throwing them both back towards the steps.

They landed heavily among the bodies of the Seraphim that had been butchered by the daemons. Livia shielded Dharmia from the impact and then gently put her back on the ground, before looking down at the scene below.

They both stared in stunned silence. The walls had been torn down and the towering golems were striding through the destruction they had wrought. It looked to Dharmia as though the old gods of Divinus Prime had risen from their slumber to strike down the works of the God-Emperor. But even the magnificence of the stone giants was overshadowed by what was happening beyond the ruined walls. The whole mountainside was being wrenched back and forth, like a flag rippling in the breeze. Vast shoulders of rock were being hurled around, triggering a thunderous avalanche from the surrounding slopes. Thousands of tonnes of rock crashed down into the valley, adding to the destruction.

The fortress shook in response and Dharmia staggered across the steps as slabs of ossified bone crashed down all around them.

'The blade!' cried Livia, hauling her back to her feet and dragging her up the steps. 'We must save it.'

A figure charged through the whirling banks of dust, making for the top of the steps. He was a giant, clad in blue battleplate, and Dharmia cowered at the sight of him, knowing immediately that it could only be one of the Adeptus Astartes. It was not so much the bulk of the warrior that terrified her; it was the expression on his face. His features were large and perfectly symmetrical, like a character from a heroic painting, and his eyes were locked on the statue of the griffon with such fierce resolve that she could not believe they would dare compete with him. He seemed even more godlike than the golems that were tearing the fortress down.

He paused and glanced at them as he passed. 'Leave!' he cried. 'The fortress is coming down!'

'Wait!' cried Livia, outraged. 'The blade is–'

'The blade is in *danger*,' growled the Space Marine, without giving her a second glance. 'There is a sorcerer in Volgatis. Leave this place!'

‘Moron,’ whispered Livia as he reached the chasm at the top of the steps.

The warrior looked across the gap to the casket beneath the griffon. Then he nodded and took a few steps back, preparing to make a running jump.

Livia glanced at Dharmia, the crooked smile back on her face. ‘The galaxy is peopled almost entirely with simpletons.’ She raised her knife. ‘Which makes life so much easier for the rest of us.’

She flicked the blade to one side as though fending off an invisible blow and muttered another spell.

The Space Marine ran and launched himself from the top step, propelled by a flicker of psychic fire.

As his feet left the edge of the steps a wound opened up in the air between him and the dais, mirroring the shape Livia had made with her knife.

Blue-and-pink flames spiralled from the hole, viscous and treacly, spewing out through the air.

The warrior cursed. He summoned white light from his staff and jammed it into the opening, trying to halt himself in mid-air.

The staff caught on the edge of the portal and lodged there, like an anchor, but his momentum was so great that his lower half flipped round and disappeared into the fire, vanishing from view.

Livia laughed at the sight of the Space Marine trapped in mid-air, only his upper half visible. It looked as though he had been sliced in two.

Her amusement was cut short by another deafening explosion in the valley.

Dharmia and Livia flinched and whirled around to see that a great thunderhead had risen up into the sky and was rolling across the ruined fortress. The mountain of dust and fumes hurtled towards them, and Dharmia saw that there were two figures riding the crest of the wave – a pair of battling warriors, wearing the same battleplate as the man Livia had just trapped in the sky. They were hacking at each other furiously with flashing blades, but both had their eyes fixed on the Ædicula Sacrum as they tumbled and rolled through the tumult.

As the front edge of the dust cloud hit, the two warriors crashed into the steps with the force of a comet, scattering corpses and wreckage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Volgatis, Divinus Prime

Antros looked down from his agonising prison as Mephiston and Rhacelus rolled to a halt and clambered to their feet. Rhacelus' face was a grotesque hybrid – a mixture of the Librarian's own stern features and Zorambus' leering grin.

'Too slow!' Zorambus cried through Rhacelus' mouth, sprinting up the steps towards the woman.

The witch drew back her knife to cleave another hole in reality, but before she could lash out Rhacelus jolted to one side, blasted against the railings that edged the steps.

Mephiston strode after him, his smouldering blade held aloft like a banner and his armour coruscating with warp-flame.

The railings gave way under Rhacelus' armoured bulk and he had to grasp on to a heat-warped strut to halt himself.

As Mephiston approached his possessed friend, the witch led her female companion up the steps towards the statue.

Antros strained to free himself from the rift that he had been cast into. His legs felt as though they were sunk in boiling tar. He could barely speak he was in so much pain. 'The blade!' he gasped, trying to get Mephiston's attention.

Mephiston looked up at him. Then he turned to the woman as she ignited

the jump pack and launched herself across the abyss, clutching her friend to her chest.

The black cracks that had spread over Mephiston's armour had now splintered across his face. Lines of vivid darkness networked his skin. He looked like a piece of shattered ivory.

Antros looked at Rhacelus and saw that his face was being contorted into a likeness of Zorambus.

Mephiston howled and lifted Vitarus to the skies, summoning wild, fulminous streaks from the clouds. The grin faded from Zorambus' face as Mephiston plunged the shimmering blade into his chest.

Zorambus stiffened and slumped backwards, almost falling into the chasm below. Mephiston grabbed Zorambus by the arm as silver blood rushed from his chest, reforming into the same silverfish swarm that had invaded Rhacelus' body a few minutes earlier.

Rhacelus' body slumped in Mephiston's grip as the silverfish scurried together and piled on top of each other, forming a glittering, humanoid shape.

Mephiston howled again, shedding more darkness from the cracks in his body. He dragged Vitarus from Rhacelus and thrust it at the silver shape.

Crimson spat from the sword, tearing through the half-formed Zorambus and turning the silverfish into a column of red flame.

A searing scream sliced through the storm as the sorcerer finally died, but the red fire did not halt at the destruction of Zorambus; it powered on across the collapsing rooftops and spires, ripping through the destruction and razing everything in its path, carving a brilliant red channel through the ruins of Volgatis and lancing out into the toppling peaks beyond.

The blast was so fierce that it knocked Mephiston from his feet and sent him crashing back against the steps. He landed heavily, enveloped in his scorched robes, then lay there, raging at the clouds and crying out in a torrent of different languages. He lashed out with his sword, as though surrounded by foes only he could see, and with every blow, waves of flame spilled out across the steps, toppling statues and immolating the surrounding corpses, surrounding Mephiston with a whirlwind of fire and dust.

Antros felt himself being dragged from the world. Clawed, inhuman hands were hauling him down into whatever hellish realm lay beyond the

sky. ‘Mephiston!’ he howled.

He strained to look at the shrine behind him and groaned in horror. The witch was hauling a sealed box from the casket beneath the statue. The casket and half the dais were smouldering and glowing where she had blasted them with sorcery. As Antros slipped from reality, she leapt from the dais, the chest under one arm and her friend under the other, grinning victoriously as she dropped into the crevasse, her jump pack blazing.

Something serpentine and muscular lashed itself around Antros’ chest and jolted him violently. His staff began to slip from its perch, ripping through the sky as though it were cloth. ‘Mephiston!’ he cried again.

A figure lurched through the maelstrom and, as it reached Mephiston, Antros saw that it was Rhacelus. His chest armour was drenched in blood and his face was a ghastly white, but he managed to dodge the waves of flame Mephiston was hurling and wrestle the Chief Librarian to the ground.

Mephiston grabbed Rhacelus by the throat.

Rhacelus gasped in agony as the Chief Librarian crushed his neck. Then he grabbed a syringe from Mephiston’s armour and jammed it into his lord’s neck.

The dark lines faded from Mephiston’s armour and he loosed his grip, looking around at the desolation with a dazed expression. Rhacelus collapsed on the steps and Mephiston stood up, reeling like a drunk and looking for something.

‘Mephiston!’ cried Antros, only his hands and head still visible. He could just see the crevasse. ‘She has the blade. The sorcerer. Stop her!’

Mephiston staggered up the steps and looked out at the receding figure. Then he simply nodded and watched her go.

‘Stop her,’ whispered Antros as all his worst doubts returned to haunt him. Mephiston was letting the witch go. She was a Chaos witch and he was *letting* her take the Blade Petrific. A crushing despair washed over Antros and his strength failed. A forest of unseen limbs enveloped him, wrenching him from the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tamarus Mountains, Divinus Prime

Antros lay on the mountainside listening to the universe. The skies overhead were clear, an indigo crescent, edged with wisps of crimson cloud and speckled with the tiny silhouettes of eagles, wheeling lazily on distant thermals. There was no mirror, no serpentine horrors, just reality. But it was the chatter of minds that filled Antros with renewed hope. Mephiston had also brought an end to the silence of the Miracle. With the death of Zorambus, the crushing, psychic void of Divinus Prime had been filled with sound. The voices of the Imperium once more echoed around Antros' skull. He could hear the tortured screams of astropathic choirs and the unknowable whispers of the Navis Nobilite, steering the Imperial Navy back to the world they had thought lost. Divinus Prime was saved – returned to the firm benevolence of the Imperium; so how could Mephiston be anything other than a hero?

Antros groaned as he struggled to lift himself into a sitting position. Mephiston was standing a few feet away near the prone figure of Rhacelus. At first Antros thought Rhacelus might be dead, but then he noticed that the Librarian was twitching and muttering in pain. Rhacelus' chest was cocooned in some kind of psychic shell – a glimmering web of energy that sparked and danced across his armour. Mephiston was not looking at his old friend. He stood right at the cliff edge, looking out across the peaks of

the Tamarus Mountains.

Antros stared at him in confusion. Mephiston had brought a world back within reach of the Emperor's light. There were millions of pilgrims and priests scattered across Divinus Prime that would now have a chance at salvation. Mephiston had also hauled him back from whatever hellish realm he had fallen into. And yet… Antros pictured again the moment Mephiston had looked at the witch and let her go. There had been no doubt in the Chief Librarian's eyes. He had nodded quite deliberately before letting her dive to freedom, taking the Blade Petrific with her. What did that mean? How could that be anything other than the action of a traitor?

Mephiston spoke, as though sensing Antros' thoughts.

'The fleet will take a few weeks to reach the planet and lift us from Mormotha,' he said.

Antros frowned. 'We wait for the fleet? Why not return the way we came?'

Mephiston shook his head and looked down at his still-trembling fist. 'We will travel behind the safety of a Geller field, as we should have done when I brought us here. I have made enough mistakes.'

Antros looked down at his ruined body. His power armour had been crushed by whatever warp creature had been dragging him into the immaterium. When Mephiston's blazing form had plunged in after him, the ceramite plates had already been slicing into his muscles. By the time Mephiston had hauled him back to reality, he looked as ruined as Volgatis. He tried again to move but he still could not feel his legs. He wondered how Mephiston imagined they would cross the miles back to the capital.

Antros rested his hand on his bolt pistol, thinking the unthinkable as he considered all that he had seen. The scale of his doubt staggered him. Since the moment of his insanguination, he had believed that the Chief Librarian had been saved by Sanguinius himself – cured of bloodlust and madness as a proof of what the Chapter could still be; proof that their bloodline could yet be saved. But now he had seen Mephiston use his power to aid a Chaos-worshipping witch, a heretic who stole a relic so powerful thousands had died trying to protect it. How could such power have come from the Angel?

There was a blast of white noise from Mephiston's vox and then a voice cut through the din.

‘*Nothing,*’ said Captain Vatrenus in his usual blunt tones.

Mephiston shook his head. ‘Look again. I know there are dragoons hiding in the caves to the east. We cannot leave any remnants of that army intact.’

‘*Chief Librarian,*’ said Vatrenus, then severed the link.

Antros slowly raised the pistol.

‘Perhaps you *will* kill me, Lexicanium Antros,’ said Mephiston calmly, without turning around. ‘But not today.’

Antros stared at the gun, horrified by the accusation, but knowing it was fair.

‘We are transitory beings, Antros,’ said Mephiston. ‘To live is to change. We do not remember what we were yesterday or know what we will be tomorrow.’ Mephiston looked down into the valley at the smouldering wreckage of Volgatis. With the death of Zorambus, his golems had become lifeless stone once more. Even from here their shattered forms were visible, sprawled across the ruins. ‘Perhaps I will never know who saved me that day,’ continued Mephiston, lowering his voice. ‘Perhaps I will never know who plucked Calistarius from Hades Hive and created this monster called Mephiston. But I know what I am *now*, what I am in this moment.’

He stood up and turned to face Antros. There was no trace of emotion in his features. ‘The Blood of Sanguinius is in my veins, Antros, I know it. And the Angel sees more, and further, than those two damned sorcerers could ever dream of. They cared nothing for the souls on this world, Antros. They came here to compete for a prize. I realised that the moment I met Zorambus. For all the incredible power required to create it, the “Miracle” was just a discreet veil, flung over Divinus Prime to hide a trivial game they were playing to amuse their master.’

‘Their master?’ gasped Antros.

Mephiston nodded and held up the little iron bolt he had taken from Arch-Cardinal Dravus at the amphitheatre. A ghost of a smile played around the edges of his thin lips. ‘I have him, Antros.’

Antros shook his head, confused.

‘I have tried for decades to locate the scourge of this sector, Antros – the puppet master behind all these pointless wars.’ Mephiston looked up at the eagles circling overhead. ‘But he is so clever, so *powerful*. I have never been able to even glimpse his shadow. I have to admit, it took me a while

to realise why the Angel allowed Saint Ophiusa to call me here. I thought it was so I could save myself.' He glanced at his hand and Antros saw that it was twisted at a peculiar, painful-looking angle, the flesh almost entirely transparent in places. Behind his armour, Mephiston was burning away, fading into darkness. 'It was only in Mormotha that I saw it. But now I understand.'

'Understand what?' Antros was now engrossed in Mephiston's words, his despair supplanted by a sudden rush of hope.

'I was not brought here to save myself. There is no salvation for me. The Blade Petrific is not a cure or a harness for my Gift. I see that now.'

'Then why was Ophiusa able to call you here? What were all your visions and auguries pointing to?'

'I see it clearly now. The monster that plagues the Cronian Sector is no longer beyond my reach. He was so engaged in his arrogant, callous little game that his mask slipped. He has revealed his face.' Mephiston held up the bolt, swinging it on its chain. 'That witch is rushing straight home to claim her prize, Antros – rushing to present the Blade Petrific to her master. She will be my guide.' He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. 'Look.'

Antros watched with delight as the sky rolled away like mist, revealing the galaxy whirling overhead. Stars and clusters of stars turned around the mountaintop. It looked like an astrolabe made of diamonds, with every system and spiral arm linked by the same, intricate network Antros had seen in the Chemic Spheres.

Mephiston led Antros' mind across the heavens and he saw their fleet rushing towards them – vast battle-barges tearing into real space and hurtling towards Divinus Prime. Then Mephiston led his mind further and showed him something else. A starship was soaring *away* from Divinus Prime – a small, sleek craft, unmarked and glimmering with stealth shields.

'The witch,' breathed Antros.

As the ship translated from real space and slipped from view, Antros gasped with pleasure. It had left behind it a silver thread, a luminous trail that hung down through the stars and traced all the way back to the Tamarus Mountains and the tiny bolt held between Mephiston's fingers.

'That's why you let her go,' whispered Antros.

Mephiston nodded and Antros saw something he had never expected to see: the Chief Librarian smiling.

'The Blade Petrific was never meant to save me from destruction, Antros. The power of Sanguinius cannot be tempered, I see that now. I am not destined to be saved. But I *am* destined to save our Chapter. To prove that we are worthy heirs of Sanguinius. I do not need to control the Gift – I need to live long enough to unleash it in the right place.' He held the bolt up against the sky, looking through it, his breath billowing in the bitter mountain air. 'And now I have a map.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darius Hinks' first novel, *Warrior Priest*, won the David Gemmell Morningstar award for best newcomer. Since then he has carved a bloody swathe through the Warhammer World in works such as *Island of Blood, Sigvald, Razumov's Tomb* and the Orion trilogy. He has also ventured into the Warhammer 40,000 universe with the Space Marine Battles novella *Sanctus*.

An extract from *Azrael*.

The Chapter serf's eyes glistened and his lips quivered with suppressed shock. His whole body trembled as he waited for Grand Master Azrael's permission to return to his position at the communications bay of the *Penitent Warrior*. Azrael regarded him without thought for several seconds, his mind blank, robbed of inspiration by a moment that left him shocked and numb.

'Very well, Artisane,' he managed to say. The serf fled back to his bench, to the comfort and shared grief of his companions.

Nobody else on the bridge had heard yet, each engrossed in their own affairs and duties. The battle-barge was poised above the world of Rhamiel and was one of many ships in escort to the Rock, its complement of First Company veterans standing ready to respond to their commanders' next words.

His Chapter aide, Delefont, had his back to the Grand Master. The unaugmented human discussed some detail of navigation with the manoeuvres team. Sergeant Belial, second in command, was at the position of the gunnery officer, overseeing the firing solutions for their next bombardment of the renegades' headquarters.

Azrael stood alone. He felt cocooned in silence, isolated from everything that had transpired in the last forty-two seconds since the tightband communiqué had arrived from Master Sheol. The universe had changed. Azrael's world had shifted on its axis and what happened next would determine not only his own fate, but very likely that of the entire Chapter of the Dark Angels. Not just the thousand warriors that besieged Rhamiel, but unknown generations to come.

Into the gulf came a storm of thoughts of personal, strategic and

historical import. He considered ripples from a stone being thrown into a pool, but really a boulder had been tossed into a raging torrent. To try to discern what effects that might have, and what measures might be taken to guide the course of the ripples, was pointless.

'Focus.'

It was as though the word came from outside him, but Azrael had whispered it himself. The single utterance brought clarity. His priorities were clear, the issues to be addressed falling into place as soon as the decision was made.

He activated the Chapter-wide vox channel.

'This is a terrible day in the history of our brotherhood,' he began. 'Supreme Grand Master Naberius is dead. By authority of my position as Grand Master of the Deathwing, I hereby issue notice of command and assume temporary leadership of our Order for the duration of the current campaign.'

All eyes on the bridge turned to him, surprise in some, shock and despair in others, and he could imagine such a reaction from the many Dark Angels fighting on the world below. It was imperative that tragedy did not become disaster.

It was his duty by tradition and doctrine to take over directly to ensure continuity of command, but they did not permanently grant him the highest rank of the Chapter. When the present campaign was resolved the members of the Inner Circle would convene to select one from their number to be the next Supreme Grand Master. Azrael was, by opinion of most of the Inner Circle and previously Naberius himself, the natural successor. Yet it was possible that others might put forward another name from amongst the leadership. A strong display during the Rhamiel suppression would forestall any potential for disruptive politicking amongst the Chapter's commanders.

'Our resolve must remain the same, to bring the traitors to the justice of the sword. All battle-doctrine remains as briefed – pursue your enemies without remorse and fight for the shade and memory of Lord Naberius.'

Belial quickly crossed the bridge, the mass of his Tactical Dreadnought armour dwarfing even the Space Marines attending the control stations, its size matched only by Azrael's own Terminator plate.

'How did it happen?' asked the senior sergeant. 'Do we have details?'

‘Few,’ replied Azrael. ‘The Supreme Grand Master’s Thunderhawk was brought down as it led the assault towards the enemy citadel. Honoured Decifael reported unusually intense anti-air fire. Traitors swarmed the wreckage, hundreds of them. Decifael was the last to fall. We just received his last transmission. Naberius was killed by enemy shelling of the crash site before cultists overran their perimeter. Too easy. The artillery was already marked on that position, the renegades poised for the following attack. This was planned and executed with precision.’

Azrael did not continue, keeping further suspicions to himself.

‘We cannot allow his remains to be taken by the enemy,’ Belial said. He dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘Our foe is are twisted, corrupted by the Warp Powers. Who can say what dark acts they might perform on the body of a Chapter Master, what rituals such a vessel might fuel?’

Azrael did not reply, though he had already contemplated the possibility.

‘The Chapter banner lies with them,’ Belial continued.

‘But we would better honour the sacrifice of Lord Naberius with victory,’ Azrael countered. He gestured towards a hololith projection of a sphere a little larger than his head, slowly rotating to show hotspots of conflict across Rhamiel. Red icons clustered around Imperial institutions overrun in the earliest days of the rebellion, such as the Adeptus Arbites precincts, the Administratum tithe houses and the star ports. Black icons marked where significant ground defences had been eliminated, concentrated around the capital fortress known as the Iron Stalagmite and several Adeptus Mechanicus forge cities.

‘The cultists are the froth of rebellion, but they are churned by a darker, deeper force. We know there are Night Lords here, orchestrating events. From our initial contacts, it seems that the taint is restricted to the upper echelons of the ruling hierarchy plus several regiments of the planetary defence force, aided by a large number from a dissident faction of the Adeptus Mechanicus. This is a coup d’état, not a popular uprising. Naberius believed that if we can sever the command of the Night Lords and eliminate the armed resistance, the world might be restored to order in good time.’

He did not add that Naberius and the Chapter Council had also believed there was an even more sinister root to Rhamiel’s turn against the rule of the Emperor. Belial did not need to know of such discussions. A name,

much cursed by past leaders of the Dark Angels, had been mentioned in connection with the revolt – a name that had forced a vote on the council which Naberius had narrowly won. A vote in which Azrael had joined with those eager to bring several companies to Rhamiel in pursuit of nothing more than rumour.

Whether the Fallen were here or not, it seemed the arrival of the Dark Angels had been expected, if not desired. The speed with which the rebels had sprung their counter-attack certainly suggested the latter, and Naberius' death may have been their intent all along.

'I do not think the two objectives are at odds,' said Belial. 'A strike into the enemy command base would deprive the foe of Naberius' remains, secure the Chapter banner and provide intelligence on the whereabouts of the traitor legion puppet masters.'

It was hard to argue with such an assessment. The Dark Angels had only scant information regarding the Night Lords and their role on Rhamiel. Even their numbers were unclear, though for them to remain hidden so well it suggested only a handful of Space Marines were operating directly on the planet. Near-orbital was littered with micro-moons and asteroid satellites, plenty of cover for a small ship to drift undetected for some time.

'Very well, we strike at the headquarters. First Company only. The short-range teleport screen is no longer an obstacle. The renegades have foolishly left the beacon on the downed Thunderhawk operational, giving us a location fix for teleport assault direct into the compound.' Naberius had planned to use teleport homers to support his swift assault. It was ironic that in death he had succeeded in what he had failed to do in life. 'The remaining companies will continue with the cordon operation.'

'Coordinates have already been obtained,' said Belial. 'I have checked them myself against the latest surface reports. They should deliver us into a central courtyard just outside the inner wall.'

'We can get no closer to the citadel?'

'Their anti-strike shield also bars teleport, Grand Master,' said Belial. His voice carried just the tiniest hint of censure – disappointment that his commander thought there might be something Belial had overlooked.

'Of course, sergeant,' Azrael replied. 'Who is on first strike?'

'I will lead Squad Belial and Squad Therizon will simultaneously

teleport. Remaining squads to deploy in pairs as detailed in your standing assault doctrine, Grand Master.'

'Then I will join Squad Therizon.'

Belial opened his mouth to say something but then stopped himself.

'What is it, sergeant? Give voice to your opinion.'

'As Grand Master of the Deathwing it is your duty, your right, to lead the assault. As Supreme Grand Master you have wider concerns to occupy your attention. But it is not my place to make assumptions.'

'It is a good observation, Belial, but mistaken in one respect. If I cannot command the Chapter with a blade in my hand, I am not fit for the position.'

Belial smiled, a rare occurrence.

'Of course, Grand Master. A truth I overlooked. You shall bring credit to the First Company and I am sure the Chapter Council will endorse your elevation permanently.'

'Any thoughts of the future are just a distraction from the mission at hand, sergeant. The Chapter Council, and my role within it, can wait until victory is secured.'

Belial accepted this with a salute and started towards the door. Before he had left the bridge, Azrael's train of thought had sped on and he signalled for Delefont to attend him.

'Convey my regards to Master Sheol and have him prepare the Fourth Company for a supporting assault. The Deathwing shall break the rebel gates, and Sheol shall have the honour of meeting us.'

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