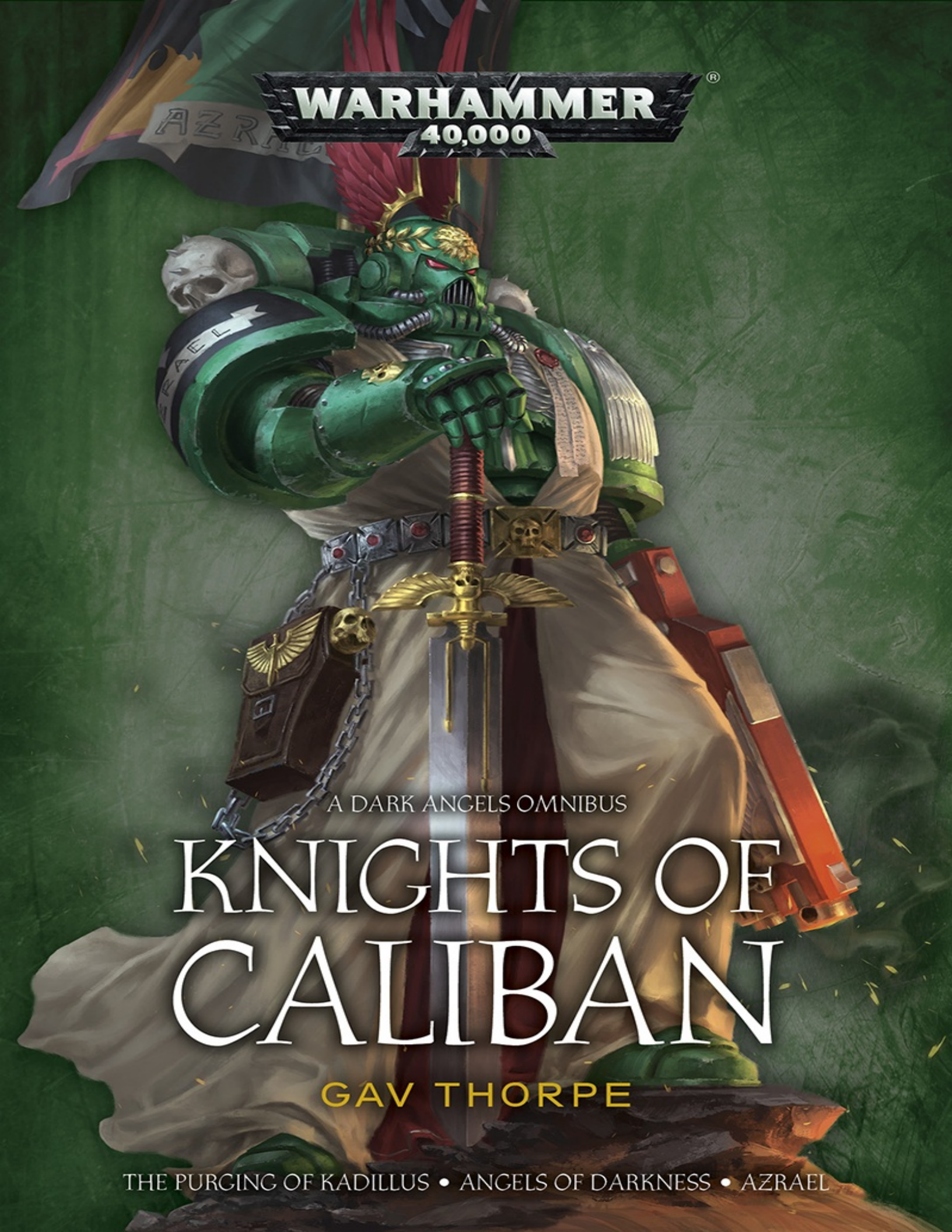
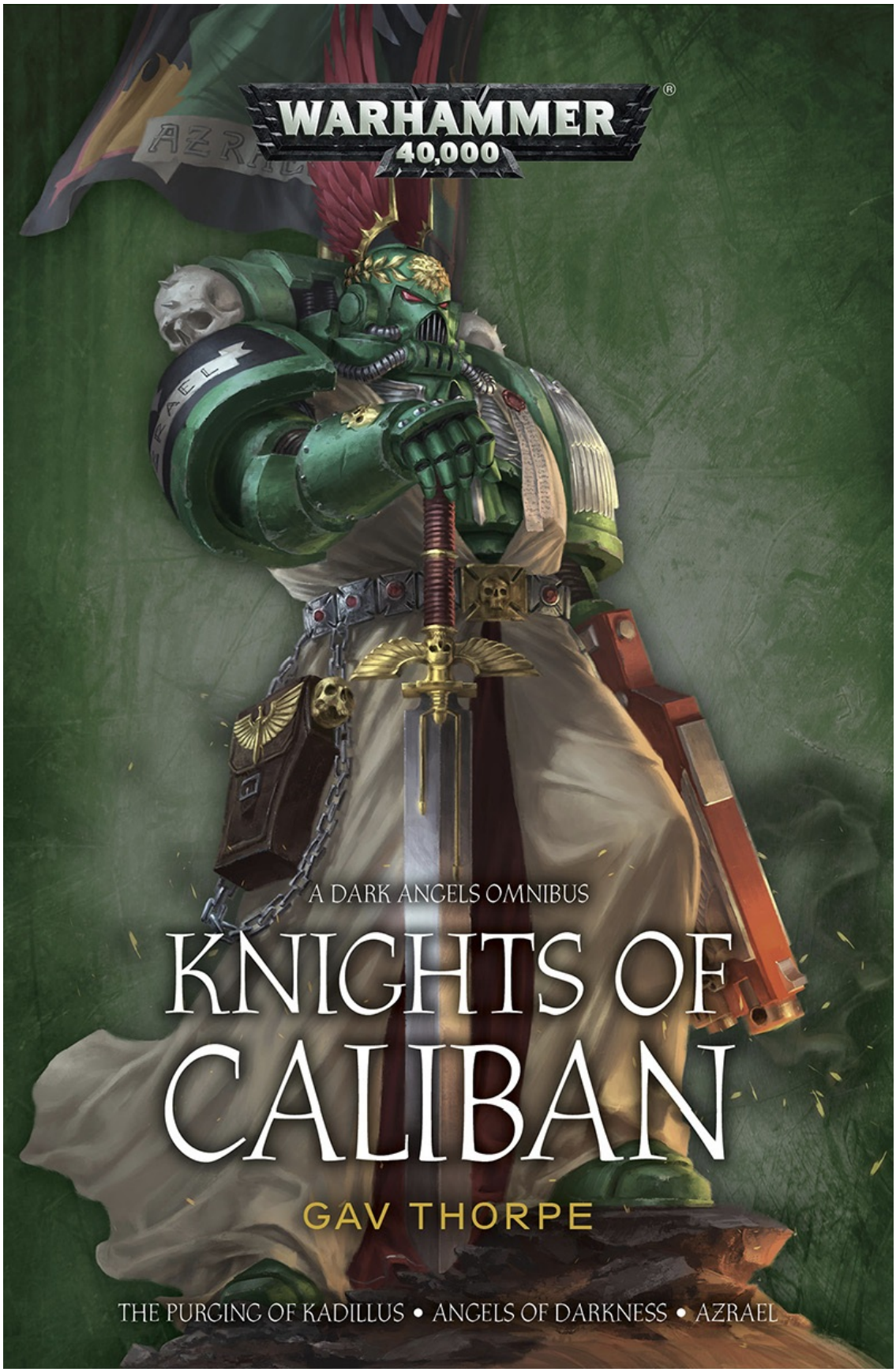

WARHAMMER
40,000
A DARK ANGELS OMNIBUS
KNIGHTS OF CALIBAN
GAV THORPE
THE PURGING OF KADILLUS • ANGELS OF DARKNESS • AZRAEL


WARHAMMER
40,000
A DARK ANGELS OMNIBUS
KNIGHTS OF CALIBAN
GAV THORPE
THE PURGING OF KADILLUS • ANGELS OF DARKNESS • AZRAEL

***More Dark Angels from Black Library***

**LEGACY OF CALIBAN**
*by Gav Thorpe*
An omnibus featuring the novels *Ravenwing*, *Master of Sanctity* and *The Unforgiven.*

**DREADWING**
*A Horus Heresy novella by David Guymer*

**ACCEPT NO FAILURE**
*An audio drama by Gav Thorpe*

**HOLDER OF THE KEYS**
*An audio drama by Gav Thorpe*

**PANDORAX**
*A Space Marine Battles novel by C Z Dunn*

**DARK VENGEANCE**
*A novella by C Z Dunn*

**THE ASCENSION OF BALTHASAR**
*A Space Marine Battles audio drama by C Z Dunn*

**TRIALS OF AZRAEL**
*An audio drama by C Z Dunn*

**MALEDICTION**
*An audio drama by C Z Dunn*

**WAR OF SECRETS**
*A Space Marine Conquests novel by Phil Kelly*

**Visit blacklibrary.com for the full range of novels, novellas, audio dramas and Quick Reads, along with many other exclusive products**

# BLACK LIBRARY

To see the full Black Library range visit

**blacklibrary.com**

Including Limited and Special Editions

Multiple formats available

**MP3 AUDIOBOOKS | BOOKS | EBOOKS**

# CONTENTS


Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
THE PURGING OF KADILLUS
 Order of Battle
 Prologue
 The Tale of Boreas
 The Tale of Naaman
 The Tale of Nestor
 The Tale of Naaman
 The Tale of Naaman
 The Tale of Boreas
 The Tale of Belial
 The Tale of Tauno
 The Tale of Belial
 Epilogue
ANGELS OF DARKNESS
 The Tale of Astelan
 The Tale of Boreas
 The Tale of Astelan
 The Tale of Boreas
 The Tale of Astelan
 The Tale of Boreas
 The Tale of Astelan
 The Tale of Boreas
 The Tale of Astelan

# The Tale of Boreas

## AZRAEL

### Part One

Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: 887939.M41#1312
Date Ident: 887939.M41#1351
Date Ident: 887939.M41#1423
Date Ident: 887939.M41#1441
Date Ident: 887939.M41#1444
Date Ident: 887939.M41#1452

### Part Two

Date Ident: 627819.M41
Date Ident: 935939.M41
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: 939939.M41
Date Ident: 941939.M41

### Part Three

Date Ident: 237744.M41
Date Ident: 032940.M41
Date Ident: 113940.M41#0734
Date Ident: 113940.M41#0845
Date Ident: 114940.M41#0852
Date Ident: 114940.M41#0900

### Part Four

Date Ident: 114940.M41#1423
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: Unknown
Date Ident: 114940.M41#1745

Date Ident: 119940.M41
About the Author
An Extract from ‘Rise of the Ynnari: Wild Rider’
A Black Library Publication
eBook license

# KNIGHTS OF CALIBAN

THE PURGING OF KADILLUS • ANGELS OF DARKNESS • AZRAEL

Gav Thorpe

BLACK LIBRARY

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

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

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

# THE PURGING OF KADILLUS

# ORDER OF BATTLE

## THE DARK ANGELS 3RD COMPANY
## AT THE START OF THE KADILLUS CAMPAIGN

The 3rd Company was at full strength at the outset of the campaign. Due to its duties overseeing the final stage of recruitment from Piscina V, the 3rd Company had more than the usual number of Chaplains and Librarians attached from the Chapter Headquarters. In addition, the 3rd Company had been reinforced with many squads from the 1st, 2nd and 10th Companies.

*Note on reorganisation: All forces underwent ad-hoc reorganisation throughout the campaign to account for losses and the splintering of Dark Angels across the two main fronts. This involved the battlefield promotion of several battle-brothers to the rank of sergeant and the allocation of temporary squad nomenclature (such as Exacta, Vindictus, Annihilus).*

*Headquarters*
Master Belial, Company Commander
Interrogator-Chaplain Boreas, Company Chaplain
Brother Nestor, Company Apothecary
Brother Arael, Company Standard Bearer
Revered Venerari, Dreadnought

*Additional Headquarters*
Master Chaplain Uriel
Interrogator-Chaplain Sarpedon
Lexicanium Acutus, Librarian
Lexicanium Charon, Librarian
Lexicanium Hebron, Librarian

*Armoury*
*Unrelenting Fury*, Battle-barge
*Zealous Guardian, Divine Judgement*, Thunderhawk Gunships
Brother Hadrazael, Techmarine
Brother Hephaestus, Techmarine
4 Predator Battle Tanks
12 Rhino Transports
4 Razorback Transports

*3rd Company Squads*
Squad Andrael, Tactical Squad
Squad Azraeth, Tactical Squad
Squad Dominus, Tactical Squad
Squad Lemael, Tactical Squad
Squad Nemeaus, Tactical Squad
Squad Peliel, Tactical Squad
Squad Menelauis, Assault Squad
Squad Zaltys, Assault Squad
Squad Heman, Devastator Squad
Squad Scalprum, Devastator Squad

*1st Company (Deathwing)*
Squad Adamanta, Tactical Dreadnought Armour Squad
Squad Malignus, Tactical Dreadnought Armour Squad
Squad Vigilus, Tactical Dreadnought Armour Squad

*2nd Company (Ravenwing)*
Squad Aquila, Bike Squadron
Squad Laertius, Bike Squadron
Squad Orphaeus, Bike Squadron
Squad Validus, Bike Squadron
5 Land Speeders
2 Attack Bikes

*10th Company (Scouts)*
Squad Arcanus, Scouts Squad

Squad Astarael, Scouts Squad
Squad Damas, Scouts Squad
Squad Naaman, Scouts Squad
Squad Volcus, Scouts Squad

# PROLOGUE

A fuel tank exploded, showering squat bodies and shards of metal across the refinery. Guttural laughter rang around the bare rock walls of the asteroid-ship, against a backdrop of chattering guns and flames. A handful of stocky figures stumbled from the fire, airsuits tattered, thick beards and bushy sideburns smoking. They carried high-velocity riveters and fired them at the mob of green-skinned attackers thundering down the tunnel. A few orks fell to the fusillade; others returned fire with their crude weapons, filling the tunnel with muzzle flare and bullets.

'Give 'em anuvver!' Ghazghkull barked at an ork to his left.

The greenskin loaded another improbably sized rocket into its launcher and stood with legs splayed, aiming at the survivors through an array of cracked lenses. The rocket hissed wildly for a moment before the propellant erupted into flames, blowing apart the launcher, tearing off the ork's arm. The ork's pained cursing was drowned out by Ghazghkull's deep laugh.

'Wun fer da doks,' said the warlord, waving roaring warriors forwards with a claw-sheathed hand. Ghazghkull's laughter stopped as a slew of rivets pattered across the thick plates of armour protecting the warlord's gut. The massive greenskin turned his red scowl upon the scattered demiurgs sheltering in the ruins of the refinery. 'Time to finish 'em off. Get stuck in, boyz!'

Following their warlord, the orks charged into the burning debris, hacking and chopping with serrated cleavers and whirring-toothed blades. Ghazghkull levered aside a twisted sheet of metal to reveal a demiurg hiding behind it. The warlord roared along with his multi-barrelled gun as he blazed away, shredding the miner into bloody lumps.

'Dakka dakka dakka! Dat's 'ow ya do it!'

Ghazghkull's gaze fell upon another victim scurrying into the collapsed doorway of an outbuilding. The massive ork shouldered his way through the wall after the fleeing miner, erupting amidst a cloud of tangled reinforcing rods and shattered stone. The demiurg swung a rock-drill at Ghazghkull, aiming for the chest. The diamond-edged bit skittered and shrieked across the warlord's armour and bounced away, the impact almost wrenching the drill from the miner's hands.

'Nice try,' growled Ghazghkull, looking at the scoring across his chestplate. The ork lifted up an armoured, energy-wreathed fist. 'My turn, stunty!'

The claw crackled with arcs of power as Ghazghkull smashed in the demiurg's craggy face, the force of the blow thudding the miner's head into the far wall. Smoke billowed from the exhausts of the warlord's armour as Ghazghkull lifted up an armoured boot and crushed the headless body beneath its deep tread. It was always worth making sure.

Thundering out through another wall, Ghazghkull looked around. Scattered pockets of orks were running here and there looking for more targets, but it appeared the refinery was empty of enemies. The warlord spied a tiny figure scrambling through the rubble, dragging a huge pole and banner behind him.

'Oi, Makari!' Ghazghkull bellowed at his standard bearer. The gretchin flinched and turned wide eyes to his master.

'Yes, boss?' Makari squeaked. 'What can I do fer ya?'

'Where's da meks? Dey needs to be gettin' da ore and worky-bitz back to da ship.'

'I'll go find 'em, boss,' said Makari. He planted the flag in a pile of debris before gratefully scurrying back down the tunnel.

Ghazghkull strode to the top of a slag heap and looked around. The stunties hadn't provided much sport, but the warlord didn't mind. The orks were here for loot and gubbinz. The meks could make some really good stuff with stunty gear.

Another explosion rocked the artificial cavern, a blossom of fire engulfing a mob of orks investigating one of the mine entrances. Ghazghkull thought it was a secondary explosion, but it was soon followed by three more, each heralded by the telltale smoke trails of rockets.

'Dat's odd.'

'What's dat, boss?' asked Fangrutz, clanking up the slag heap, the joints of his armoured suit wheezing and whining.

'Look at dat,' said Ghazghkull, pointing a serrated claw towards the explosions. 'Dose is rokkits. Oo's firin' rokkits at us?'

‘Da stunties?’ suggested Fangrutz.

‘Stunty rokkits don’t smoke and whirl about like dat.’ Ghazghkull smacked Fangrutz on the head again for making such a stupid suggestion. ‘Dey iz orky rokkits!’

In confirmation of Ghazghkull’s suspicion, a horde of green-skinned warriors poured out of the mine entrance, guns blazing in all directions. They wore yellow-and-black body armour and jackets, the back banners of their nobz decorated with stylised grinning half-moons.

‘Dey ain’t our boyz!’ Fangrutz declared. Ghazghkull’s gun clanged loudly across the back of Fangrutz’s head again. The nob’s eyes crossed momentarily and he stumbled.

‘Course dey ain’t, ya zoggin’ squig-brain. Get down dere and give ’em some dakka. Dey’re after our loot!’

Ghazghkull set after the boys as they poured into the firefight, which in some places became a vicious scrum of blades and fangs. Smoke churning behind him, Ghazghkull lumbered into a run, bellowing orders.

‘Stop ’em gettin’ up on dat roof! More dakka dat way! Give ’em some boot levver!’

The warlord watched a blur of red and black come sailing out of the mine; it quickly resolved into one of his boyz, a ragged hole in the chest. The body splattered and bounced noisily across a rock just in front of Ghazghkull. The ork heard a rapid-fire din above the creaks and puttering of his armour’s engine, a drawn-out rattle accompanied by a flare of orange in the mouth of the mine entrance. A swathe of orks fell to the ground, bloodied holes punched across their bodies. Through the gap, Ghazghkull saw another huge ork advancing from the mine, chain gun hurling bullets in all directions.

The rival warlord was wearing mega-armour as well, painted a garish yellow and decorated with black flames. Compared to the rusty joints and oil-spattered pipes of Ghazghkull’s suit, the newcomer’s armour was spotless, haphazardly inlaid with chunks of gold and – Ghazghkull sneered at the ostentation – dozens of ork teeth.

‘Wot a show-off,’ the warlord muttered as he levelled his gun at the newcomer.

Ghazghkull opened fire, spraying the remaining contents of the magazine at the enemy warlord. Bullets skipped off the floor and walls of the mine tunnel, and a few found their mark, rattling over the plates of his foe’s mega-armour. The Bad Moon warlord – such gaudy displays of wealth were unmistakeable – turned his own weapon on Ghazghkull as a series of empty clicks from his gun echoed

around the chamber.

'Oh zog!' grunted Ghazghkull.

He was engulfed in a firestorm of flashing projectiles. A particularly vicious burst caught him in the right shoulder, sending slivers of metal spinning in all directions. The armour's engine gave an alarming cough but continued working, although with a new rattle.

The two warlords closed in on each other, the boyz parting to allow their leaders to get to grips, the ground trembling under the combined thudding of metal-shod boots.

Ghazghkull struck first, swiping his power claw across his foe's chest, shredding metal. He winced as the Bad Moon smashed his own long claw onto the top of Ghazghkull's armoured head. A boot found Ghazghkull's knee plate, which clattered off to the right. Ghazghkull brought down an elbow spike onto his opponent's left shoulder, driving it hard between the armoured plates, but was thrown back a moment later by a knee-trembling blow to his gut.

Parted for a moment, the two warlords locked glares. Around them the fighting between the rest of the orks died away to some desultory shooting and the occasional punch or kick. Dozens of red eyes were turned towards the pair, expectantly awaiting the combat to recommence.

'Zog off!' roared Ghazghkull. 'Dis is my loot!'

'I woz 'ere furst!' the other warlord bellowed. 'You zog off!'

''Ow?' asked Ghazghkull. 'I ain't seen no uvver ship. 'Ow did yoose get 'ere?'

The Bad Moon rippled back his thick lips in a grin.

'Dat's fer me ta know, innit?'

'Don't you knows 'oo I am? I'm Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka, da proffet of Gork an' Mork. I'm da biggest, baddest warlord dere is. Ya got ta tell me!'

'I 'eard of you,' said the other, stepping back another pace. 'You gave da humies a good kickin', I 'eard. You might be da proffet of Gork an' Mork, but nobody makes betta proffet dan me.'

Something in Ghazghkull's memory tinkled into place: Bad Moon warlord, stupidly rich, plenty of dakka.

'Nazdreg?' he snarled.

'Dat's da wun!' beamed his opponent. Nazdreg's eyes narrowed slyly. 'I 'eard yoose a bit special, bit of a finker.'

'Dat's right,' said Ghazghkull. 'I 'ear da wordz of Gork, or mebbe itz Mork, itz 'ard ta say. Dey tell me clever stuff, and dat's why I'm da baddest warlord dere is.'

‘I got an idea fer ya, Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka.’

‘Yeah?’

‘We can fight dis out until wun of us iz dead, in good orky fashion…’

‘Sounds good ta me!’

‘…or we can come ta some kind of deal.’

Ghazghkull looked hard at Nazdreg and his boyz. There were quite a lot of them. He was sure he could probably beat them, but… It’d taken him ages to get enough boyz together after being chased around by that Mork-cursed humie boss, Yarrick, and it did seem a bit of a waste to be killing other orks when he could be killing the hated humies.

‘What you offerin’?’ he asked cautiously.

‘I’ll tell ya ’ow I got on dis rock wivout a ship, if you and yer boyz come wiv me on a li’l job I got planned.’

Ghazghkull suddenly became aware that he was the centre of attention from both sides. He waited for a while to see if Gork or Mork had anything to say on the matter. There were no voices in his head, so he guessed that they didn’t care either way. He took a deep breath and lowered his power claw.

‘I’m lissenin’…’

Blue-feathered gulls circled screeching above the wall.

Tauno followed them against the dismal grey sky, humming quietly to himself. As one of the birds dipped past, Tauno looked back across Kadillus Harbour. Surrounded by the high curtain wall, the city squatted on the steep coast of the volcanic isle, a mess of grey and silver against the dark rock. The raised landing platforms of Northport jutted out from the wall a few kilometres away; an orbital craft the size of a city block rose from the starship dock, smoke and plasma wreathing protective blast ramps, while atmospheric craft buzzed and growled to and fro, borne aloft by jets and rotors.

From the gatehouses, highways of cracked ferrocrete cut through sprawling tenements and smoke-wreathed processing plants, converging at the central plaza. Next to the square loomed the spire of the Dark Angels basilica, a towering edifice of buttresses and gargoyles broken by stained-glass windows and ornate balconies. The buildings around the basilica seemed cowed by its presence, none reaching higher than three storeys, as if to be higher would be an affront to the spectacle of the Space Marines’ temple-keep.

Past the basilica, Kadillus dropped steeply towards the harbourside. The sea was little more than a glinting blur on the horizon, obscured by a tangle of cranes

and gantries that stooped over the high warehouses. A dozen wharfs stretched into the ocean, where supertrawlers three kilometres long unloaded their harvests.

Tauno heard a grunt of confusion from Meggal next to him in the watchpost.

'Have a look at this,' said the other sentry, handing Tauno the magnoculars. 'Looks like a dust storm or something.'

Tauno looked through the magnoculars and could see a thick wall of dusty cloud coming towards Kadillus Harbour, still at least half a dozen kilometres away.

'Anything from the comm?' he asked, not looking away.

'Nope,' replied Meggal. 'Come to think of it, aren't Kendil and his lot meant to check in from Outpost Theta?'

Tauno flicked his blond hair from his face, increased the magnification and tried to hold the magnoculars as steady as he could, peering into the dust storm. He could see nothing save the cloud billowing up from beyond a rise in the ground. He caught movement, a darker shape within the dust. Resting his arms on the parapet he concentrated, trying to focus the magnoculars.

Suddenly in pin-sharp clarity he saw figures emerging from the dust. Steadying himself again, he gently thumbed the focus rune a little more. More and more shapes emerged from the haze, churning up the dirt in their wake, a great crowd of figures on foot: stooped, green-skinned, waving weapons in the air. As the seconds passed, Tauno could see the columns advancing steadily in a seemingly endless procession. There were thousands of them.

'Emperor's balls…' gasped Tauno, the magnoculars dropping from his cold fingers.

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## DARK CATHEDRAL

A one-eyed lion stared down at Boreas from the shattered stained-glass window. His black armour was dappled with red and blue and yellow by flames flickering inside the window. Detonations continually rocked the rubble-strewn street; one shell exploded atop a buttress above him, showering chunks of plascrete from the basilica onto the Chaplain and his squad. Fanged green faces leered from windows in the upper storeys. The orks spat down at the Dark Angels and occasionally rattled off bursts of fire with equal effect.

A growl welled up from deep within Boreas as he waited for the other squad to assemble on the opposite side of the ruined basilica. He looked through the remnants of the main doors into the central nave. The open space was filled with piles of rubble and green-skinned bodies. Banners hundreds of years old lay smouldering in the ruin.

'In position at the east entrance, Brother-Chaplain,' Sergeant Peliel reported over the comm. 'Awaiting your command.'

'Squad Heman ready for overwatch,' crackled the next report in Boreas's ear. The Chaplain glanced over his shoulder and saw the Devastators aiming their heavy weapons from a rooftop on the opposite side of the street.

'The Lion's shade revolts at the presence of this filth in his shrine,' Boreas rasped to his battle-brothers. 'Bring peace to his soul and honour to his memory with bolt and blade. Commence the attack!'

For the third time since arriving at the shrine, the Chaplain stormed up the steps and plunged through the shattered doorway, bolt pistol in his right hand, crozius arcanum in the left. The eagle-headed maul blazed with blue light that threw sharp shadows across the central hall of the basilica. The walls and windows of the upper floors exploded inwards as missiles and lascannon blasts from Squad

Heman pounded the ork positions. Green bodies flopped over the gallery railing above the hall, tumbling to the rubble trailing thick blood.

Plascrete crunching underfoot, the Chaplain turned sharply to his right and headed for an iron spiral staircase next to the crumbled remains of a minor altar. On the other side of the nave, Peliel and his Dark Angels headed for the steps descending into the catacomb.

The orks opened fire as Boreas reached the bottom of the stairs, bullets and blasts of energy sending up dust and shards around him. Sparks surrounded the Chaplain as he pounded up the steps, bullets shrieking from the metal, the whole staircase shaking under the weight of his tread. Behind him, the other Space Marines returned fire. The whole nave echoed with the roar of bolters. Fiery trails cut the gloom, each ending in a small explosion that rocked the upper gallery.

Boreas reached the gallery at a run. It was even darker here; with a vocal command Boreas switched his autosenses to thermal. Several orks were sprawled lifeless along the marble-inlaid floor, blood cooling in greasy pools. He spied the yellow heat-outlines of living foes at the far end of the gallery, their guns blazing harsh white, bullets zipping down into the squad below.

The Chaplain levelled his pistol. A targeting reticule sprang into view as his finger touched the trigger. His first shot took the top off an ork's head, blood spraying against the wall in a red chromatic display. Two bolts took his next target in the chest, exploding the ribcage and breastbone, ripping apart organs. To his heightened senses it seemed as if the orks turned on him in slow motion, drawing up their guns towards this new threat. A fourth round ripped through the shoulder of the next foe, sending the ork spinning through a doorway.

The first bullets zipped around Boreas as he subconsciously registered the thunder of more Space Marines coming up the stairs behind him. Sending another bolt into the gut of an ork, Boreas spared a millisecond glance to his right, across the nave where more orks had gathered.

He saw a blossom of fire and flung himself against the wall as a rocket spiralled towards him, the warhead smashing into the plascrete just behind him. The rosarius hanging on a thick chain around Boreas's neck blazed with power as shrapnel engulfed the Chaplain; the rosarius's energy field converted the mass of the shards into flares of bright light. Boreas heaved himself away from the cracked wall as more bullets skipped and screamed along the gallery. He headed straight for the orks, bolts from his battle-brothers whipping past either side of him, detonations cracking along a crude barricade the orks had built out of

splintered furniture and bundled wall-hangings.

The Chaplain emptied the rest of his bolt pistol into the greenskins as he charged the barrier, sending them reeling back. He leapt as he reached the barricade, one foot atop the broken remnants of a cabinet, driving his other into the face of an ork swinging at him with a snarling chainsword. The alien's head snapped back as Boreas's momentum carried him into the thick of the orks, his crozius crashing under the upraised arm of another foe to liquidate flesh and bone.

Boreas landed and rolled, sweeping the legs from another enemy with his right arm as he regained his feet. Something hammered into his backpack and he turned on his heel, driving an elbow into the face of an ork, fangs splintering, jaw breaking. A heavy blade slashed out of the throng and caught him on the right side of his helmet, its serrated edge scraping through paint and chipping ceramite.

The ork backed away, just out of reach. Boreas hurled his empty pistol into the beast's face, this distraction giving the Chaplain a moment to follow up with a bone-crunching kick to the knee that brought down the alien. The rosarius flared into life again as more blows rained down on the Chaplain, blinding the orks. Boreas smashed one across the face with his crozius, the wing of the eagle-head burying itself deep in a red eye. He chopped with the edge of his hand into the throat of another, lifting the beast from its feet, windpipe smashed.

Bolt-round detonations sprayed the Chaplain with gore as the following Dark Angels joined the melee. Bursting through the barricade, the Space Marines fell upon the orks with chainblade bayonets and monomolecular-edged combat knives.

The dozen or so remaining orks were not about to give up the fight, and hurled themselves at the squad roaring throaty war cries and obscenities. Four of them bore Brother Zepheus to the floor, stabbing at his face and chest, levering their blades into the joints of his armour, blasting away with heavy pistols, the ricocheting bullets as much a danger to themselves as the Dark Angels.

Boreas's crozius smashed into the skull of an ork pinning down Zepheus, splitting it wide open. The ork reared up, still alive, dragging its serrated blade from a crack in Zepheus's armour. It swung the weapon at Boreas and missed, spattering the Chaplain's skull-helm with droplets of his battle-brother's blood. Incensed, Boreas shoulder-charged the greenskin, tackling it at chest height to drive it into the wall with a snap of bones, plascrete exploding into dust around them. Boreas snapped the ork's neck in the crook of his arm to be certain and

cast the limp body to the floor. He turned to see Sergeant Lemael burying his chainaxe into the armpit of the last greenskin, the whirring blades spraying gobbets of flesh and shards of bone over the gallery rail.

Boreas pressed on to the archway at the end of the gallery, past which were found the inner chambers of the basilica. Lemael split his Space Marines into two combat squads, joining the Chaplain with Brothers Sarion, Dannael, Aspherus and Zamiel. The remainder of the Dark Angels took up overwatch positions along the gallery while they waited for an Apothecary to attend to the badly wounded Zepheus.

'You might want this, Brother-Chaplain,' said Aspherus, proffering Boreas's bolt pistol, which he had evidently retrieved from the pile of ork bodies. The Chaplain took it with a murmur of thanks, slammed home a fresh magazine from his belt and darted a look through the archway, looking for foes. A corridor ran to the northern end of the basilica, shattered windows on the right-hand side, half a dozen doors leading into the scriptoriums on the left. There was no sign of the orks. Boreas switched off his crozius to conserve its power cell and nodded the Dark Angels forwards.

'Check and clear every room,' Lemael told his warriors. 'Be vigilant for booby-traps. There is no telling what these filthy greenskins have been up to.'

Sarion went up on point, kicking in the remnants of the first door while Dannael kept watch along the corridor. The Space Marines hurried into the room, bolters ready. Within, all had been upturned. Illuminating desks and low stools were broken, and tattered and soiled manuscripts were scattered across the floor. Digiquills and styluses lay in a snapped heap beneath the broken door of a storage cabinet and crude ork glyphs were daubed on the walls in black and red ink. Blossoms of green and yellow and purple and blue showed where pots of other colours had been dashed against the walls, floor and ceiling for amusement.

'Scum,' muttered Boreas.

He had expected such desecration, hardened his anticipation of it, but it was still something of a shock to see it wrought in rooms where only a few days before he had walked amongst the company serfs as they copied out the great texts of the Dark Angels Chapter. It had been an ordered, serene enclave in the midst of the bustling port-city, dedicated to reflection on the Lion's teachings, the wisdom of the Emperor and the doctrine of battle.

His eye was caught by a scrap of plasti-parchment, edges wrinkled and melted from an attempt to set it alight. He hung his crozius from his belt and picked it

up, recognising the partially obscured illustration in the margin. He gave an ironic laugh.

'Page fourteen of the *Contemplations of Castigation*,' he told his battle-brothers. He read the first lines out loud. 'Blessed be the warrior that punishes the unclean. In his purgation of the Heretic, the Mutant and the Alien, the blessed Astartes proves his purity. Only he that is free of taint can uphold the role of Executioner of the Imperial Will.'

The rest was unreadable, but Boreas knew it by heart. His voice turned to a snarl as he continued from memory.

'With the honour of that duty there comes the responsibility to prosecute such punishment to the utter lengths of possibility. No Heretic, no Mutant, no *Alien* is above the reproach of the cleansing fire of battle. If the Imperial Will is to extend to all corners and reaches of the galaxy, there can be no respite from the eternal pursuit for justice and the perpetuation of vengeance against the immoral.'

Boreas crumpled the sheet in his fist and dropped it to the ground. Pulling free his crozius, he thumbed the weapon into life, bathing the room with its blue glow.

'The vilest of offences has been committed against us, my brothers,' growled Boreas. 'The orks do not simply attack a world of the Imperium, they attack a world under *our* protection. This building is not simply a strategic asset to be held against an enemy. This is a basilica of the Dark Angels, an extension of the Tower of Angels, a spiritual part of lost Caliban. An attack here is an attack against the Dark Angels Chapter. It is an affront to the Lion! It is not only our duty to bring righteous persecution against those who have sinned against us; it is our *right*!'

Sergeant Lemael answered, echoed by the rest of the Space Marines.

'Kill the alien!'

The next two rooms were equally ransacked and equally empty of foes to punish for the act. As the Dark Angels left the third chamber, Lemael commanded them to stop. Boreas listened, his autosenses picking up what the sergeant had first detected: grunts and scrapes from the adjoining room.

'An interesting development,' remarked the sergeant. 'Orks attempting an ambush?'

'The strange subtlety of thought is not matched by their subtlety of action,' replied Brother Sarion as the clatter of something dropped on the wooden floors sounded from the next room.

‘Teach them the lesson of their error,’ rasped Boreas, holstering his bolt pistol to pull a fragmentation grenade from a belt-pack.

‘Zamiel, do your duty,’ ordered Lemael.

The Space Marine lifted his flamer in acknowledgement, the harsh blue of its igniter reflected from his dark green armour.

‘Purge the alien!’ shouted Boreas, kicking open the next door.

He caught a glimpse of fanged mouths snarling at him as the orks rose from their hiding positions behind overturned lecterns and tables. The Chaplain tossed a grenade into the back of the room while four more arced past him, bouncing off the walls and ceiling. Boreas ducked back as simultaneous detonations filled the chamber with shrapnel, smoke and metal spilling from the doorway.

A moment later Zamiel stood at the door, flamer spraying white-hot promethium into the scriptorium, the crackle of flames blanketing the harsh yells and panicked bellows of the orks within. He panned left and right, coating everything with the sticky fuel, setting light to wood and flesh and parchment. Only when every surface was burning did he release the trigger and pull up his weapon, stepping back to allow the others to enter the inferno.

Surrounded by flames, the Space Marines burst into the room, firing their bolters into the twitching, charring bodies of the orks. Boreas could feel the heat of the flames, but a glance at his power armour’s integrity display showed that the guttering blaze was well within tolerable limits. As the promethium burnt out, the Chaplain found himself standing inside a blackened shell, a few licks of fire flickering here and there. The bones of the orks lay in contorted heaps, stuck with chunks of burnt flesh, steam hissing from boiling marrow and blood, while pools of fat sizzled beneath them.

‘We must move on to secure the spire and dominate the city square,’ announced Lemael. ‘Haste is required before the enemy send reinforcements.’

‘Righteous is our cause,’ said Boreas. ‘We shall not fail the Chapter.’

Leaving the burned-out room, the squad moved on, continuing their sweep towards the apex of the basilica, where the main spire reached one hundred metres into the sky above Kadillus. This was their goal: the highest point in the city centre, from which the Dark Angels would be able to pour fire into the surrounding buildings and, more importantly, accurately direct the artillery fire of their allies against the ork army that had seized the harbour over the previous two days.

The ork attack had taken the people of Kadillus unawares, and with that surprise the greenskins had driven through the heart of the city, directly for the

docks and wharfs. Nobody yet knew where the enemy had come from; there had been no warning from orbital arrays, nor the Dark Angels ship circling high above Piscina IV.

It was fortunate that the Dark Angels were here at all. The Chapter had arrived four weeks ago as part of a much-delayed visit to take recruits from the neighbouring world of Piscina V. The bulk of the Chapter had left six days ago, leaving the 3rd Company and a few auxiliary squads from other companies to oversee the last stages of recruitment. Had it not been for the swift reaction of Master Belial and his warriors, the whole city might have fallen within hours. The company commander had faced the ork warlord once already, and from what Boreas had heard, Belial had been fortunate to survive the encounter.

As it was, the orks were holed up in the waterfront district and along a line of buildings that stretched to the central square. In the close confines of the city and without a clear idea of enemy numbers or their purpose, even the Dark Angels were wary of facing the brutal orks head-on. Master Belial's plan was to contain the aliens at the docks, whilst breaking the link with those in the city centre. The two forces could then be purged separately once the planet's defence force, the Free Militia, had been fully mobilised.

The first stage was to secure the basilica, but that had proven easier ordered than accomplished. This was Boreas's fourth attempt, and was showing the greatest success so far.

As the Dark Angels forged further into the press of rooms, resistance was sporadic and scattered; the orks had evidently split their numbers to avoid sharing the spoils, and so were easily overcome by the Space Marines. However, their progress through the three storeys of administrative chambers between the central nave and the spire did not go unnoticed by their green-skinned adversaries.

The orks counter-attacked as the squad gained the first landing at the base of the stairwells leading up into the spire. Lemael had his foot upon the first step when something clattered around the landing above, bouncing down to spin gently at his feet. It was a stick grenade.

As Boreas and the others turned away, the grenade went off, filling the enclosed space with a storm of metal shards. Everything went silent for a moment as the Chaplain's autosenses cut in to block the concussive effect of the detonation. His rosarius blazed, engulfing him with its protective shield, but still he felt dozens of impacts on his armour as shrapnel swallowed the squad. When Boreas's hearing was restored, the hallway was still ringing. Lemael lay slumped against

the wall, his right leg armour cracked by the blast, his knee twisted at an unnatural angle.

'Cover the stairs!' snapped Boreas. 'Protect your sergeant!'

Dannael and Sarion advanced a few steps up the stair as Zamiel and Aspherus slung their weapons and dragged Lemael down the hall, leaving a trail of dark blood.

More grenades clanged down from above. Most exploded harmlessly before reaching the Space Marines; Dannael threw two back up the stairs before they detonated, much to the surprise, and apparently some amusement, of the orks. Another buzzed and smoked just out of reach but failed to go off.

The thudding of boots on the bare plascrete warned of the descending ork mob. Sarion opened fire first, cutting down the first greenskins to come around the corner of the landing. Some of the following orks tripped on the bodies of the first, but others leapt over the corpses, ploughing down the steps with reckless disregard for balance. As Sarion stopped to reload, Dannael took up the fusillade, firing steadily into the press of green bodies rushing him, each shot blowing a fist-sized hole in flesh and bone.

Undeterred, the orks leapt to the attack, smashing mauls and blades into the Space Marines' armour, the stairwell resounding with wordless yells and the crack of fracturing ceramite. Within moments Dannael and Sarion were swept off the stairway and back into the hall, battering at their foes with bolters, fists and feet.

Boreas joined the defence, bolt pistol spitting rounds, crozius leaving a trail of burning energy as he swept the power weapon into the orks. The hall was barely wide enough for the three Space Marines to stand abreast, Sarion to the Chaplain's right, Dannael to the left. The orks were similarly hampered and could not bring their greater numbers to bear down the stairwell. A violent stalemate ensued: Boreas, Dannael and Sarion battered down any greenskin that reached them, but were unable to press further forwards.

'Brother Boreas!' Sergeant Peliel barked urgently through the Chaplain's comm. 'The orks have breached the catacombs from the sewers. Encountering extreme resistance. Three brothers lost. We are falling back to the central nave. Advise that your current position will become untenable.'

'The Astartes do not retreat!' Boreas snarled back. For two days possession of the basilica had constantly changed hands. The Chaplain was determined it would not fall to the orks again. 'Fight to the death, sergeant!'

The comm crackled for a moment before Peliel replied. Boreas parried a saw-

edged cleaver swung at his gut and fired a bolt-round into the gaping mouth of the ork wielding it, the back of the greenskin's head spattering across those behind.

'Sacrifice at this point offers no tactical benefit, Brother-Chaplain,' the sergeant said calmly. 'Enemy armed with portable heavy arms and powered weapons capable of penetrating Astartes armour. Last-stand scenario would not provide sufficient delay to their advance. We are executing a fighting withdrawal to the main basilica. Urgently suggest you perform same.'

Boreas suppressed a snarl of frustration. Distracted, he did not see a gun muzzle thrust through the press of orks. Once again his rosarius saved him from the worst, enveloping him with light as bullets sprayed against his chest. He smashed aside the gun with the tip of his crozius.

'Acknowledged, Sergeant Peliel. Will rendezvous in the nave in three minutes.' Boreas heard the click of the intersquad channel closing and addressed the Space Marines with him. 'Take Sergeant Lemael and reform your squad on the gallery. Brothers Dannael, Sarion and I will guard the withdrawal.'

Boreas concentrated on fending off another wave of orks as affirmatives sounded in his ear. He fired the last bolt from his pistol into the back of an ork clinging to Sarion's left arm, the projectile shattering the creature's spine.

Side-by-side, the three Space Marines back-stepped along the hallway. Sarion had discarded his mangled bolter and fought with his combat knife; Dannael fired his weapon in a long burst, cutting down half a dozen foes until the bolter was empty, opening a gap of a few metres between the Space Marines and their adversaries. They came level with a doorway that led into a narrow room at the front of the basilica, the outer wall dominated by a huge rose window.

'Cover,' Boreas told the other two, stepping back behind them. They closed shoulder to shoulder. He ejected his bolt pistol magazine and slammed in another: his last one. 'Fall back to the gallery.'

Even as he issued the order, a larger ork shouldered its way through the mass, taller even than the Dark Angels. It swung a huge axe two-handed, blade crackling with forks of energy. The blow connected with Sarion's neck, shearing off the battle-brother's head in one sweep.

Boreas fired his pistol, the salvo of miniature missiles exploding across the breastplate of the gigantic alien. The ork was thrown back, dropping to one knee.

'Full retreat, brother!' the Chaplain told Dannael. 'I shall protect you.'

One of the orks leapt in front of its leader, blazing away with a pistol. Boreas swayed, taking the brunt of the salvo on his left shoulder pad, ceramite cracking

and showering to the floor. The Chaplain glanced down at his rosarius and saw the power crystal glowing fitfully. Another fifteen or more orks crowded down the stairs behind their leader, jeering as Boreas backed into the doorway leading to the rose window. He ripped another frag grenade from his belt. He held it above his head for the orks to see and thumbed the activation switch.

'Kill the alien!' he snarled, the words roaring from the external speakers of his helmet. He tossed the grenade into the orks as they scrambled and shoved each other back up the stairs; all except the leader, who launched itself at the Chaplain with its axe held overhead.

Boreas met the ork with a step, crashing his armoured fist into its broad chin as the grenade exploded on the stair. The blow barely slowed the creature's charge, but was enough to make the axe blow swing harmlessly past Boreas's left shoulder. The ork's momentum carried it forwards, crashing into Boreas, sending both sprawling to the floor.

As the Chaplain pushed himself to his feet in the doorway, the surviving orks thundered down the steps, leaping and tripping over the mounds of their dead, firing their guns. The wall and doorframe splintered with bullet impacts. The ork leader hauled itself upright and took a fresh grip on its weapon. It grunted something Boreas could not understand and heaved its blade at the Chaplain's head. Boreas ducked back as the crackling axe head sliced into the doorway, ripping through wood and plascrete before becoming stuck. The Chaplain brought up his crozius under the beast's straightened arm, smashing into the ork's elbow. Bone shattered and the arm bent strangely. The ork gave a howl of rage and pain, let go of the axe and smashed a fist into Boreas's face, cracking an eye lens, the blow tearing away a breathing pipe.

Forced back by the punch, Boreas found himself trapped in the window room. Crowding around their wounded leader, the orks pressed through the door; Boreas could hear pounding feet as others chased after Dannael. The Chaplain's crozius opened up the face of the first to lunge at him, smashing teeth and bone.

With his free hand, Boreas pulled the last grenade from his belt.

'I am Astartes, warrior of the Emperor!' he barked, tossing the frag grenade into the centre of the room. As it left his hand, the ork leader surged through the press, clamping an iron-strong arm around Boreas's neck.

The grenade detonated. The blast combined with the ork's impetus to send Boreas and his foe crashing through the rose window. They tumbled head-over-heels through the air, locked together in a violent embrace. The ork tried to bite Boreas's face through the wreckage of his helmet, breaking a tooth, while the

Chaplain battered at its back with his crozius.

Spinning and fighting, the two fell thirty metres to the open square below, crashing into the ferromac ground. The ork took most of the impact, chest crushed by Boreas's weight, head smashed to a bloody pulp on the hard surface. The Chaplain's right shoulder pad disintegrated into flying shards and he felt something snap in his arm just above the elbow. His neck wrenched from side to side as he bounced heavily, backpack carving a furrow through the reinforced bitumen. Red indicators flashed across his vision, warning of widespread damage to the power armour's systems.

Even before he could focus again, Boreas felt adrenal fluids pushed through his veins as his twin hearts pounded and blood raced through reinforced arteries and veins. He felt the pain as a distant sensation, something witnessed rather than experienced, and lay still for a moment, analysing the situation.

Only a few seconds had passed since he had fallen, but he realised the danger he was in. The city square was contested ground, held by the orks to the east and the Imperial forces to the west. As if on cue, the buildings to his right were illuminated by firing; the orks had moved some of their field guns into a half-ruined Administratum tithe house and now shells erupted just to Boreas's left. He gave silent thanks that the orks were notoriously poor shots.

Gritting his teeth, the Chaplain pushed to his feet and broke into a limping run, explosions tearing up fresh craters in the ferromac around him. He reached sanctuary behind one of the basilica's buttresses as counterfire screamed and screeched from the other side of the square. Las-fire rippled through the air; the Piscina Free Militia must have taken up the guard duties from the hard-pressed Dark Angels.

'The Emperor protects,' he muttered, heaving out of cover and dashing for the corner of the basilica, dust and plascrete raining down on him from impacts on the wall above.

He rounded the corner to see Sergeant Peliel and the survivors of his squad firing at some foe inside the main nave, their bolts flashing through the open side doors and ruined stained-glass windows. Knowing that he was in no position to fight for the moment, Boreas sought the cover of the buildings on the opposite side of the street and found the remnants of Squad Lemael waiting for him. They stood guard at the windows, bolters ready for any orks that dared to leave the sanctuary of the basilica. There was no sign of Dannael.

Straightening proudly, Boreas walked calmly to one of the windows and looked at the ravaged cathedral. Smoke was billowing from an upper floor, no doubt a

flare-up from Zamiel's flamer. He turned to the other Space Marines.

'Never fear, brothers. We are not yet ready to surrender our shrine to the orks. We will give them no respite. We will return!'

Tracer fire and explosions illuminated the streets and rooftops of Kadillus Harbour, except where thick banks of smoke choked the twisting roads and drifted slowly up from the docks. Next to Sergeant Peliel, Boreas looked at the silhouette of the basilica from the roof terrace of a worker tenement two streets away, one of the higher vantage points in the city still in the hands of Dark Angels and the Piscina forces. The neat flower beds had been churned up by a procession of armoured boots, the balustrade rail pocked by stray bullet holes from long-range ork shooting.

With a sub-vocal command, Boreas increased the magnification of his autosenses, zooming in on the spire of the basilica. He linked his view through the short-range command channel so that it displayed in Peliel's helm.

'It is not just a matter of our Chapter heritage, brother, though that is reason enough to retake the shrine,' the Chaplain said quietly. 'The view provided by the basilica is of strategic importance. When we regain the position, local forces will be able to deploy their artillery observers and bring down heavy fire on the ork positions around the docks.'

The thud of boots heralded the arrival of Techmarine Hephaestus, followed by two robed and cowled Chapter serfs. They carried replacement parts for Boreas's broken armour. He flexed his arm without thought, testing the re-set bone and subdermal bracing performed by Apothecary Nestor a little earlier. The joint was stiff, but he felt no discomfort.

'I have had to retro-fit some Mark VI parts for your armour,' said the Techmarine. One of the four servo-arms extending from his backpack whined forwards, a tubular section of arm plate in its grip. 'I will do my best, but you should be wary of taking too many blows to your right side.'

'I understand, brother,' replied Boreas. 'I am sure that your best will be more than sufficient.'

The Techmarine and his attendants set to work restoring Boreas's armour, arc torches sparking, ceramite-welders hissing. The Chaplain pushed the activity from his thoughts and addressed Peliel.

'You are reluctant, brother-sergeant.'

'I am,' replied Peliel. 'Four times we have occupied the basilica and four times we have suffered assault and been expelled. I do not believe it is prudent to

expend further energy on a direct assault. We should drive the orks from the main square and surround the basilica from all sides.'

'We lack the numbers for such a cordon,' said Boreas. 'Shock assault – that is what we do best, brother. Once we have total possession of the basilica, the orks will not be able to retake it.'

'The Planetary Defence Forces have plenty of soldiers for an encirclement, Brother-Chaplain.' Peliel waved a hand to the east. 'More forces arrive from the outlying fortifications.'

'Delay, delay, delay!' spat Boreas. 'I find your lack of fervour for this battle unsettling, brother-sergeant. I will not have it recorded in the Chapter history that I allowed the basilica of Piscina to fall into ork hands and then required the Planetary Defence Force to retake it! Would you have your name put beside such an entry?'

'No, Brother-Chaplain, I would not.' Peliel bowed his head in apology. 'I do not wish to be judged reluctant for battle. I hope only to aid you in assessing your strategy. Forgive any impudence on my part.'

'When Kadillus is retaken, we shall discuss your penitence in the basilica,' said Boreas.

'Perhaps it would be wise to consult with Master Belial on the best course of action?' suggested Peliel.

Boreas stepped back – to a muttered complaint from Hephaestus labouring on his armour – and scowled at the sergeant.

'The company master is in command of all the forces in the docks. He has entrusted the battle for the centre of the city to me, and needs no further distraction.'

'I understand, Brother-Chaplain. But if–'

'Enough!' roared Boreas. 'It is my command that we retake the basilica. You will restrict your comments to those that will improve the chances of success with that objective in mind. You have not been sergeant for long, Brother Peliel. Honour Master Belial by proving that his faith in you is well placed.'

'Of course, Brother-Chaplain,' said a chagrined Peliel. His next words were spoken with a growled conviction. 'My squad will lead the next assault. I will deliver the basilica to you, Brother-Chaplain!'

'That is good, brother-sergeant. Prove your courage and dedication not by your words, but by your deeds in battle. It is the orks that try to shame us; it is the orks that will suffer the punishment.'

Peliel looked long at the basilica. Nothing could be seen of his expression

inside his helmet but his voice was edged with fervour.

'No ork will live to rue the day they chose to test the might of the Dark Angels.' Peliel placed a hand on the Chaplain's chest. 'Thank you for your guidance and patience, Brother Boreas. Your wisdom and integrity are examples to us all.'

'Make your preparations well, brother-sergeant,' said Boreas. 'There will be hard fighting this night.'

'None will fight harder than I,' Peliel declared. He turned on his heel and strode down the steps leading into the tenement.

'How much longer will this take?' Belial asked Hephaestus.

'Only one more thing, Brother-Chaplain,' the Techmarine replied, his servo-arms recoiling behind his back. Hephaestus gestured to one of his serfs, who came forwards carrying Boreas's skull-shaped helm. The cracks had been sealed and the broken lens replaced; fresh white paint glistened in the flickering light of the burning basilica.

Boreas put on the helmet and tightened the seals. He ran through a rapid series of autosenses checks and confirmed that all systems were working. Satisfied, the Chaplain tried out the replacement fibre bundles and armour on his right arm. His fist smashed through the stone of the balustrade without effort.

'Good work, brother,' Boreas said, smiling. 'Now, if I could press upon you to find me a replacement pistol, I will cite you for the benedictions of the Chapter…'

The nave was strangely quiet. The footfalls of the Space Marines echoed coldly in the empty hall. Thermal vision could not detect any ork presence in the main chamber, and a sweep with his suit's terrorsight confirmed to Boreas that the orks seemed content to hold the upper rooms.

'Let us narrow the battlefield, brother-sergeant,' Boreas said to Peliel.

The sergeant signalled to two of his squad, who carried between them a large demolition charge. Covered by two more of their battle-brothers, the Space Marines descended into the catacombs. The rest of the fifteen Space Marines took up overwatch positions around the stairwell, guns trained on the galleries overhead and the main door at the end of the nave.

'Charge in place, Brother-Chaplain,' came the report. 'Timer set.'

'Confirmed,' replied Boreas. 'Regroup with main force.'

The Space Marines pounded back up to the nave and the whole group took shelter at the far end, away from the catacomb entrance. A countdown timer running down in the right of Boreas's view reached zero and the basilica shook

with the detonation, a dense cloud of smoke and dust sweeping up from below, filling the hall. With a drawn-out rumbling, part of the floor gave way, burying the steps and barring any egress into the main hall.

The Chaplain detached five Space Marines to watch the remaining entrances and signalled to the others to follow him to the upper floors. This time the orks would not push the Dark Angels back.

The fight through the upper rooms was every bit as fierce as the previous encounters. The orks had received reinforcements through the breached vaults beneath the nave and defended every stairwell and doorway with a storm of bullets and a forest of blades. Hour by bloody hour the Dark Angels battled their way through the maze of rooms and tunnels, with bolter and grenade, missile launcher and flamer. In many places walls collapsed from the exchange of fire, opening up new avenues for the Space Marines to press forwards and the orks to counter-attack.

The under-strength Dark Angels squads broke and reformed as the flow of battle dictated, sometimes a solitary Space Marine holding up a mob of aliens, other times Boreas's warriors coming together to break through particularly strong resistance. At times the fighting became so chaotic that even Boreas was not sure whether an adjacent room contained friends or foe; a constant stream of reports across the comm gave only half the picture as the fortunes of the Space Marines and their enemies ebbed and flowed.

Boreas fought for the most part with his thermal vision, falling upon the orks through the night-shrouded, smoke-filled corridors like the mythical angel of vengeance that featured on so many of the Chapter's banners and murals. Any other warrior would have described the dark rooms and flickering of flames as hell; to the Space Marines they were simply the perfect environment for their style of warfare. Though the orks were not to be underestimated at close quarters – they were savage fighters who relished hand-to-hand combat – the experience, coordination and armour of the Space Marines proved decisive. One room at a time, one floor at a time, the Dark Angels drove back the orks until only a knot of resistance remained at the top of the spire.

Boreas gathered his Space Marines for a final attack. Peliel was amongst those eight that joined the Chaplain at the foot of the final flight of stairs.

'One last push for victory, Brother-Chaplain,' said the sergeant. 'Let us be at the foe and finish this!'

'Your zeal is noted, brother-sergeant,' replied Boreas. 'You may have the

honour of leading the attack.'

Peliel raised a fist in thanks. The sergeant turned to the five members of his squad that were present. Boreas listened intently to Peliel's words, searching for any hint of reluctance. There was none.

'The enemy have nowhere left to run, brothers. *Executium non capitula.* We will strike like the sword of the Lion, swift and deadly. No mercy!'

'No mercy!' chorused the Space Marines.

Peliel and his warriors headed up the stairs at a run, feet crashing on the stone steps. Boreas followed at a steadier pace, reaching the foot of the stairs as the first flashes and roars of bolter fire sprang into life above. The remaining three Space Marines followed him with their weapons levelled, ready to spring into action if needed. Judging by the remarks over the comm, Peliel had the situation well in hand, his orders echoed by the rattle of fire and *crump* of grenades in the spire chamber.

For several minutes the firefight continued. Boreas gripped his crozius tightly, resisting the urge to bound up the steps and join Peliel. It was the sergeant's resolve that had caused him concern, not his ability, and it was important he was given the chance to prove himself. The ragtag orks that had survived the Space Marines' onslaught would be little threat. As the echoes of the last shots died down and silence descended, Boreas addressed his companions through the external vocalisers.

'Move back to the nave and join with your brothers there. We will rendezvous with you shortly and prepare the defences.'

He ascended the steps quickly as the three Dark Angels set off back the way they had come. The stairs emerged in the centre of the upper spire room. Green-skinned bodies were piled all around, at least two dozen; more than Boreas had expected. The gouges in Peliel's armour and that of his squad told their own testament to the fury of the trapped orks. The sergeant prowled the dark room with his power sword in hand, decapitating every corpse that still had a head. It was standard doctrine when facing orks, who had a distinct ability to recover from seemingly fatal wounds, sometimes rising up from mounds of their fallen to strike when unexpected.

A thick-runged ladder led to an open trapdoor in the ceiling, through which gleamed the first ruddy hue of dawn. Boreas glanced at the opening with suspicion. Peliel must have noticed his look.

'The roof is clear of foes, Brother-Chaplain,' said the sergeant. 'None have escaped.'

‘That is good. Send your squad to the others and follow me.’

Boreas climbed through the trapdoor and pulled himself up to the roof atop the spire. From this vantage point he could see far across Kadillus Harbour, all the way to the curtain wall in the east and the docks in the west. It was possible to trace the path of the ork attack by the ruined buildings and smouldering fires. It told of a strange, single-minded purpose. Rather than spreading out through the city in all directions, as Boreas would have expected looting orks to do, a line of devastation arrowed almost directly from one of the outer gates to the power plant at the heart of the dock workings.

Why the orks had been so determined to seize the harbour was beyond Boreas. Not knowing the orks’ motivation was an aberration that niggled at him, as had their behaviour during some of the fighting in the basilica.

His thoughts were disturbed by the clang of Peliel’s boots on the ladder behind the Chaplain. Boreas walked to the edge of the roof tower, which was surrounded by a thick wall that reached to his waist. Small, cowled figures with angels’ wings stood as silent stone guardians, each gripping a sword in its gauntleted fists.

‘The basilica is ours, Brother-Chaplain,’ announced Peliel, joining Boreas as he looked over the main square. He could see movement on both sides, but for the moment the firing had ceased.

‘Your actions have proven your dedication, brother-sergeant,’ Boreas said, turning his head to look at Peliel. ‘This would make a fine firepoint for Sergeant Heman and his Devastators.’

‘Indeed it would. Or perhaps Sergeant Naaman and some of his Scout snipers.’

‘Naaman? Naaman can be skittish, far too prone to acting on his own whims. Maybe that is a desirable trait for one who operates on his own for so long, but it is not a good example for those he is training. No, I will contact Heman and tell him the basilica is ready for his squad.’

‘Do you think the orks will attempt another attack here?’

Boreas considered this. In the growing light, he could see movement through the alleys and buildings to the west. The enemy were already gathering their numbers.

‘It is certain. I do not think the orks desire the basilica other than because we also wish to possess it. It is beyond them to comprehend its spiritual significance to us, and I doubt that they can understand the strategic importance of its location.’

‘It was one of their first targets of attack when they entered the city, Brother-

Chaplain,' countered Peliel.

'Coincidence, brother-sergeant.' Boreas pointed out the line of the orks' first advance. 'The basilica is situated on the main route through the city. We chose to defend this place, so it was inevitable that they would attack it. The ork mind is not complex, brother-sergeant. They fight where the enemy are, for the love of the fighting itself. Had we defended a market hall or the fish exchange, they would have attacked with equal vigour.'

'What is your plan for the defence, Brother-Chaplain?' asked Peliel, stepping away from the wall to survey the other approaches to the basilica.

'With the catacombs sealed, it will be a simple matter to protect the other routes of entry into the main hall. If we can hold them at the main shrine and prevent them entering the upper storeys again, the task should be within the capabilities of a single squad. We must build such barricades and defences as we can and then it is merely a matter of waiting.'

'The orks have displayed some cunning in their tactics so far. Breaking into the catacombs from the sewers was unexpected. Should we not expect them to try by some means to gain direct access to the upper levels? Jump-pack troops, perhaps? Or some other means of circumventing our defences on the ground.'

'You make a good point. A combat squad positioned on the roofs, with a spotter here, should be sufficient to deter such a move.'

The two of them crossed over the tower to look at the sloping tiles atop the rest of the basilica. A single roof more than a hundred metres long dominated, broken by several small towers along each side. At the far end, the rear of the cathedral, garrets and sub-structures nestled together. Here and there smoking holes had been torn in the slate by explosions within the shrine. There was a gap of some thirty metres between the roof and where they stood atop the rectangular main spire.

'As you say, Brother-Chaplain,' said Peliel. 'A combat squad can move freely enough to counter an attack from any direction.'

Boreas glanced again to the west. He wondered how the rest of the company was faring in the docks, where they were fighting to contain the main force of the orks. It was only that containment that prevented the enemy bringing overwhelming numbers to the centre of the city. In their race to secure the docks and its power plant, the orks had allowed themselves to be cut into two: one in the harbour, the other in the commercial and residential districts west and north of the basilica. It was vital that the two forces were not allowed to join. The basilica was only the first part of a plan that would see Boreas and his Space

Marines lead the Free Militia against the smaller concentration.

It was a sound strategy, but relied on Master Belial keeping the orks at the docks from breaking out. A strange localised atmospheric interference – possibly some unknown contrivance of the orks – was making long-range communications all but impossible. Boreas simply trusted Belial to succeed in his part of the plan.

'We should return to the others, Brother-Chaplain,' said Peliel. The sergeant walked to the ladder. 'There is still much to be done.'

'Be proud of your actions today,' said Boreas as Peliel swung himself onto the top rung.

'I am, Brother-Chaplain. Thank you for keeping faith in me.'

Boreas lingered for a short while longer. It was doubtful the orks would know yet that the basilica was again in the hands of the Space Marines. He unfastened the seals on his helmet and took it off, filling his lungs with the Piscina air. The salt of the sea, the smoke of explosions, the soot of chimneys, the tang of blood from the ork bodies below, all combined into a melange of sensation.

His eye fell upon one of the stone guardian angels atop the wall. Its left wing had been broken at some point in the fighting, alone amongst all of them. The missing piece lay on the roof behind the wall, its intricately carved feathers chipped. He hung his crozius from his belt and picked up the broken wing, turning it over in his fingers. He reached to the belt pouch below his backpack and brought out a slab of two-part resin that was used to make rapid battle repairs to armour. He kneaded the putty into a blob and delicately fixed the broken wing back in place, discarding the surplus resin over the parapet. It was a poor fix, but it would do. When the orks were driven from Piscina, he would have one of the Chapter serfs effect a cleaner, permanent repair.

It didn't matter that fires raged in Kadillus Harbour and the rest of basilica was half in ruins. Here, where he stood, everything was as it should be – or as close as he could get it. What was the point of being a Chaplain if one let the small things go unnoticed?

Pleased with his efforts, he turned and headed back to the others.

Not a single window pane remained unbroken, and every inch of the floor was covered with dust and debris. The basilica's wall hangings had all been torn down, many of them burnt beyond recognition. The altar tables had been smashed, their remnants of stone and wood used as barricades. The screens between the main nave and the sanctifying area beneath the gallery had been

toppled to block access to the upper levels. Grotesques and statues lay in pieces across the floor.

At the head of the main hall, a single statue stood, four times the height of a man, eyelessly glowering over the scene. It was a figure robed and cowled, face hidden, a bastard sword held between its gauntleted hands, its tip upon the plinth. The folds of the robes were much chipped by gunfire, the white marble stained with soot and blood. At some point during one of the many ork occupations, a greenskin had decided the statue had been lacking and had daubed a line of glyphs down one side in vivid red paint.

Boreas spared no thought for the lone survivor of the battle. For five days since the orks had first stormed the basilica he had battled for control of the shrine. Having had no time for food or drink or sleep, he was sustained wholly by the systems of his armour, and even they were showing signs of fatigue. Battle damage had impaired several of the muscle-like fibre bundles in the suit's limbs, and in particular the right arm jury-rigged by Hephaestus had developed the annoying tendency to seize up if he extended his elbow too swiftly. The air in his helmet had a bitter tang to it, evidence that the filtration systems needed to be cleaned. The Chaplain's veins were constantly abuzz with the stimulants pumping through him, from his own altered organs and the power armour. There was a dull ache inside his gut caused by his implanted organs working so hard to clear out the impurities in the fluids pumped through his blood vessels.

Despite these inconveniences, Boreas was as sharp as ever. He scanned the ruined doorways and windows, eyes searching the buildings on the western side of the basilica for warning of the next ork attack. For the last day the Space Marines had decided against clearing out the corpses, hoping that they would serve as a deterrent to further ork assaults. Flies hovered in a thick swarm over the bloated, bloodied bodies.

Ammunition had been dangerously low for the last two days. That was no longer a problem: Squad Exacta had arrived from the docks, despatched by Master Belial with supplies and information. The company master had confined the orks to the south-eastern arc of the dockyards, an area around the geothermal power station that provided Kadillus Harbour with energy; the master would be sending further reinforcements to Boreas as soon as possible. The Chaplain knew he had only to keep the basilica safe for a few more hours – and the ork lines broken – before the Dark Angels 3rd Company would be united again.

'Do you think that the orks understand their predicament, Brother-Chaplain?' asked Sergeant Andrael. His ad-hoc squad, drawn from across the 3rd Company,

were positioned behind a line of upturned desks and lecterns brought down from the upper floors before the gallery had been cut off.

'It is possible, but not likely, brother-sergeant,' Boreas replied. 'I do not think their tactical observation skills would recognise the threat to their position.'

The telltale rattle of debris drew the attention of all the Space Marines, weapons swinging to point at the western doors and windows. The noises stopped for a second and then a throaty roar engulfed the basilica as green-skinned warriors poured into the building, charging across the street and through the splintered doors, more of them clambering over the sills of the demolished windows.

The war-cry of the orks was met by a thunderous salvo of fire from the Dark Angels. Boreas fired his bolt pistol into the mass of aliens plunging through a window to his left. Torrents of flame erupted from his right, engulfing a mob surging through the doorway. The feeling of repetition was startling. This scene had been played out a dozen times already: sometimes the orks forced the Space Marines to withdraw; other times they were beaten back before they could establish a foothold. With victory so close, the Chaplain was determined that it would be the latter this time around.

As more greenskins poured into the hall, Boreas fired without pause, every bolt finding a target, emptying the magazine of his pistol. He reloaded quickly and wondered for a moment if the greenskins had, against his expectation, recognised the plight of their position and were making one last push towards their leaders in the harbour. It seemed inconceivable that this many orks did not make up their remaining forces in the centre of the city.

Despite the heavy toll taken by the flamer and bolters of the Dark Angels, the greenskins reached the barricades. Alien and Space Marine traded blows across the splintered wood and piles of rubble. Boreas parried a buzzing chainaxe aimed at his head and smashed the brow of his helmet into the wielder's face, splitting the skin with a deep gash. A rivulet of blood trickled from the wound. The ork stepped back, licked the thick fluid from its lips and launched itself at the Chaplain with a snarl. Boreas fired his bolt pistol into its gut as he caught the whirring blade on the haft of his crozius. Blood and intestines erupted over the broken plascrete and the ork fell back. The Chaplain stepped up into the space the ork had occupied and swung his crozius at the back of another's head, caving in the creature's skull.

A sputtering rocket caught the Chaplain in the chest, knocking him sideways. As he extended his leg to keep balance, the rubble shifted under his weight, falling in a small rockslide that sent him toppling backwards. Twisting to right

himself as he fell, Boreas stuck out his right arm. He cursed the instinctive move as the elbow joint whined and locked in position, jarring his whole arm as he crashed onto the floor. Ork boots and blades rained down on him as he struggled to roll to his back, encumbered by the useless arm. His vision blurred as something crashed into his head.

He kicked out as best he could, sending three orks toppling down, their leg bones shattered. With a grunt, he heaved himself onto his right side, fending off the orks with the crozius in his left hand. A heavy blade connected with his left wrist, shearing through the armoured seal into the bone within. Boreas's hand spasmed and he let go of his crozius, the gleaming eagle-headed weapon clattering out of view beneath stamping ork feet.

Peliel arrived at that moment, a blue-bladed power sword in his fist. The sergeant carved through neck and limb, cutting down half a dozen orks as he fought his way through the press to stand protectively over the fallen Chaplain. With a few seconds' respite, Boreas was able to heave himself half-upright. He grabbed onto Peliel's backpack to pull himself the rest of the way up. The Chaplain's right arm jutted uselessly out to one side, pistol still in hand. He swung his whole body to direct the weapon at the orks and fired the three bolts remaining in the weapon.

Two more of Peliel's squad waded in with bolters and knives, pushing the orks back to the doorway. Boreas powered down the energy to his right arm and let the limb flop uselessly. His eyes scoured the floor for his crozius, but he could see no sign of it amongst the debris.

Boreas and his companions were slowly forced along the hall towards the statue. Another storm of gunfire engulfed them. Peliel went down, a lucky hit exploding through the exposed seal around his neck. Boreas stooped to pick up the fallen sergeant's sword just as a grenade landed at his feet. The detonation threw the Space Marine back against the statue plinth and sent the weapon flying in the opposite direction. In the smoke and confusion, Boreas found himself cut off from the others, one arm useless and without a weapon.

A burst of plasma fire from Squad Exacta at the far end of the hall cut through the orks, vaporising their bodies with white-hot balls of energy. In the moment of distraction this provided, Boreas slipped behind the plinth and analysed the situation.

Andrael and Squad Exacta were penned in beneath the gallery. No more orks were coming in from the street; those within appeared to be the last. Several dozen of them exchanged fire with the Space Marines from behind the columns

and piles of rubble. To his right, Boreas spotted a small group sneaking through the gloom, trying to outflank Exacta's position. He recognised the telltale glitter of power weapons in their hands – these must have been the same orks that had pushed Peliel from the catacombs days before.

The Chaplain took an instinctive step towards the orks but stopped himself. Even with both hands he would be unlikely to overcome them unarmed. He cast about for a discarded knife or bolter or anything he could use as a weapon. Seeing nothing, his gaze was drawn up to the massive statue. There was only a small gap between the stone Dark Angel and the wall. Boreas pushed himself into the space and pulled himself up a few metres with his good arm, pushing with his legs.

Bracing his shoulder against the plascrete of the wall, Boreas bent his knees and drew his feet up, placing them against the back of the statue. Diverting what power he could spare to the leg servos, the Chaplain thrust out with all of his considerable strength. Thick, waxy sweat beaded on his brow as he strained every muscle. Orange warning lights flickered to red as the power armour fibre bundles fought against the weight of the statue.

A loud crack resounded across the hall as the statue broke from its plinth. It tottered forwards and then settled back again.

'For the Lion!' Boreas roared, pushing with every ounce of his strength.

Slowly at first but gathering speed, the statue fell. With ponderous grace, it crashed down onto the orks, smashing them into the rubble, shattering into shards that cut down those that had survived the impact. With nothing to brace against, Boreas plummeted to the floor, head bouncing off the wall before slamming into the plinth.

Ears thudding, half-blinded, Boreas dragged himself to his feet. Supporting himself on the edge of the plinth, he limped through the rubble to see the results of his handiwork. There were mashed body parts beneath the broken remains of the statue, and several orks crawled away trailing blood through the dust. Zamiel's flamer crackled, engulfing the surviving orks with a sheet of burning promethium. The racket of bolters died down and silence descended.

'All enemies purged, Brother-Chaplain.' Andrael's voice was quiet and hissed with static over the comm.

Boreas looked across the nave of the basilica. There were greenskin dead heaped amongst the rubble; the head of the shattered statue leant against the crushed remains of an ork. In his mind he did not see the smashed windows, the charred and ripped tapestries, the hacked and burnt wood. He saw the basilica as

it would be again, filled with the light of lanterns and thousands of candles, echoing to the solemn recitals of the Dark Angels and their serfs. At the lecterns and illuminating desks on the ravaged floors above, the scribes would again copy out the great texts of the Chapter, recording and refreshing the wisdom of the Emperor and the Lion.

Sometimes you had to bring a thing to the brink of destruction to preserve it, so that it could be built anew from the ruins; just as had happened with the Dark Angels themselves.

'Praise the Lion for his enduring will,' Boreas said.

From the wall tower, Boreas could see the smoke and dust of the forces to the east moving into position along Koth Ridge. To the west and south, there was still vicious fighting around the harbour, where the orks were holed up around the power plant.

'It's only a matter of time, Brother Boreas.'

The Chaplain turned and saw Master Belial striding into the tower from the curtain wall. He was wearing full armour, his personal standard hanging from a back banner, the white robes of the Deathwing over his green armour. Beneath the robe was evidence of the master's fight with the ork warlord, and Boreas could only guess at the injuries Belial had sustained.

'This will be a great victory for the Dark Angels,' the company commander said. 'Intelligence suggests that our foe is the warlord Ghazghkull, the infamous Beast of Armageddon. Many will be the honours from the Chapter for destroying this monster.'

'Indeed, brother-captain,' said Boreas. 'I have drawn up a list of battle-brothers suitable for extraordinary mention to Grand Master Azrael when we join up with the Chapter, both living and posthumous.'

'I expect there will be more names to add to the roll before we are done here,' replied Belial. 'The orks' landing site is somewhere to the east. Our forces occupy Koth Ridge to prevent any further reinforcements reaching the city, but that is just a precaution. I cannot imagine that the remaining ork strength outside Kadillus Harbour is any threat.'

'Will we be attacking the landing site, brother-captain?'

Belial directed a long look at Boreas and there was a hint of humour in his tone when he spoke.

'You wish to be involved in the assault? While the will might remain as strong as ever, I fear your armour and body must first be healed, as must mine. I will

think on it. As yet, the landing site has not been located. We will see what sort of enemy awaits us. It may be that our foes are few enough in number to finish with orbital bombardment. Before that, we must drive the orks out of the defence-laser silo they have occupied in the docks. Though it is unlikely the orks understand how to operate the weapon, I am not willing to risk the *Unrelenting Fury* in low orbit while it is still in enemy hands.'

'Do you think it was the defence laser Ghazghkull wanted when he took the city, brother-captain?'

'It is a distinct possibility. Possession of the defence laser negates the orbital supremacy handed to us when the orks landed their ship. I am certain the ork ship is still on the surface: no launch has been detected. When we retake the defence laser, the *Unrelenting Fury* will add orbital firepower to the arsenal at my command.'

'When do you expect to signal the Chapter with news of our victory here?'

Belial turned to the window and gazed east out of the armoured glass.

'Very soon. With the combined might of the Third Company and the Piscina Free Militia, the ork resistance in the city will be crushed. I have Scouts and Ravenwing squadrons searching for the remnants of the orks outside the city. *Xenos temperitus acta mortis*. It will not take long to eradicate the last of this filth.'

# THE TALE OF NAAMAN

## CUT AND RUN

‘Understood, brother-captain,’ said Sergeant Aquila. ‘We will continue to sweep for enemy activity.’

Scout-Sergeant Naaman waited expectantly as the Ravenwing sergeant switched off the comm-unit mounted on his heavily armoured motorbike. The black-armoured Aquila walked slowly across the road to where the Scout-sergeant was waiting with his squad.

‘We have new orders?’ asked Naaman.

‘Negative,’ replied Aquila. ‘We are to continue patrolling the Koth–Indola highway. Master Belial believes there may be some dawdling ork forces still moving towards Kadillus Harbour from the landing site.’

‘Which landing site would that be, Brother Aquila?’ asked Naaman. He spoke quietly and moved away from the Scout squad lying in the grass along the side of the road, their attention fixed to the east; there was no need for them to overhear two sergeants arguing.

‘I do not understand your question, Brother Naaman. The ork landing site, of course.’

‘The landing site that we have not yet located?’

‘Yes,’ replied Aquila. Evidently he did not understand the implications of Naaman’s question or was choosing to ignore them. The Scout-sergeant suppressed his irritation and kept his voice even.

‘That would be the same site where the orks landed without being detected, would it?’

‘No sensor is one hundred per cent reliable, Sergeant Naaman. You know as well as I do that even the most dense security screen might fail to detect a single ship entering orbit.’

‘I agree, Brother Aquila. It does surprise me that the ship that happens to have eluded detection on this occasion is large enough to disgorge many thousands of orks directly to the surface of the planet. If one ship has been capable of this, it stands to reason that there may be others, or that the ship still contains forces that present a viable threat to our position.’

‘Master Belial’s orders are quite specific, Naaman.’ The omission of the sergeant’s honorific was an indication that Aquila was losing patience with the conversation. ‘If such forces do exist, the squads spread across the eastern approaches to Koth Ridge will detect them. That is precisely why we are here and why we will be following Master Belial’s command.’

‘It is my belief that we should scout further eastwards, beyond Indola and into the East Barrens. If there are further forces, it would be wise to detect them as early as possible in order that Master Belial can consider the most appropriate response.’

Aquila shook his head and strode back to his bike. Naaman followed a step behind, unwilling to let his battle-brother simply end the conversation by walking away. Aquila swung his leg over the seat of the bike and looked at Naaman.

‘Why do you persist with this fear that the orks continue to pose a credible threat?’

Naaman shrugged. He enjoyed the gesture, only possible because his armour was much lighter than that of the regular battle-brothers. For him the greater ease of movement allowed by his wargear was symbolic of his role as a sergeant in the 10th Company. Like his armour, that role also had a significant downside: it offered less protection.

‘It is not a fear, it is a concern. I am cautious by inclination, and I would rather not have the future battle-brothers of the Dark Angels under my command encounter an enemy that they cannot overcome. It is our purpose to ascertain this sort of information for the company master and the reason why my squad and others were attached to Belial’s command. It is a waste of our abilities to restrain us to this sort of front-line patrolling.’

‘Do you not think it is good experience for your charges? When they become full battle-brothers they must have the discipline to carry out these tedious but necessary duties. Perhaps you would have preferred secondment to some other, more glorious command?’

Naaman laughed.

‘It is Master Belial’s right to choose how and when he deploys his Scouts. That

he chose to keep us from the fighting in Kadillus, as he put it "for our own protection", is entirely within his right. I am suggesting that we interpret his orders in such a way that we gather as much intelligence as possible regarding the situation to the east.'

Aquila thumbed the bike into life and his next words were barked over the throbbing engine.

'Orders are not interpreted, Naaman; they are followed. Remember that.'

The Ravenwing sergeant gunned the bike and set off in a slew of grit and dust. As he leaned the bike over onto the highway, the other four members of his squad roared into formation behind him. Soon they were lost behind the brow of a hill, heading in the direction of the Indola Mines.

Naaman returned to his Scouts, who were still patiently laying up along the roadside.

'On your feet,' he told them. 'Form up for a march.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant,' the Scouts chorused as they straightened in the long grass.

Kudin, the eldest of the squad and unofficial corporal, saluted Naaman with a fist to his eagle-blazoned chestplate. He was the most advanced of all the Scouts under Naaman's command, fully a head taller than his brethren – almost as tall as Naaman. It was likely that Naaman would recommend him as suitable for graduation from the 10th Company when this business on Piscina was settled. Then he would undergo the last transformative operations that would turn him into a full Space Marine. It was also then that he would be fully inculcated into the Chapter's creed and given his new name. Scout Kudin would cease to exist, all trace of his past life forgotten, and a battle-brother of the Dark Angels would be born. Kudin's presence was a source of pride to the others in the squad, none of whom had been in the 10th Company for more than two years.

Naaman saw the unspoken question written in Kudin's features.

'You have something you wish to ask, Scout Kudin?'

The Scout wiped a gloved hand through his close-cropped black hair, and glanced at the others before he spoke.

'We have noticed that there is an unusual tension between you and Sergeant Aquila, sergeant.'

'Have you?' Naaman's glare passed over the line of Scouts. Each of them bowed his head in submission rather than meet his gaze, even Kudin. 'As you know, when two battle-brothers of equal rank fight together, the seniority of command is determined by length of service. I have been a Dark Angel for

several years longer than Sergeant Aquila. However, Scout assignments are secondary to seniority, for we are not part of the Third Company's standard command. In those circumstances, preference of ranks goes to those brothers and officers of the company. What does that mean, Scout Teldis?'

Teldis looked up, surprised by the question.

'That both you and Sergeant Aquila have equal authority?'

'No, Scout Teldis,' Naaman replied with a shake of his head. He looked at Keliphon.

'Sergeant Aquila has seniority?' suggested the Scout.

Naaman sighed with disappointment. He threw a hopeful look at Kudin, who rounded angrily on the other Scouts.

'Sergeant Aquila is from the Ravenwing! He is also on secondment to the Third Company and that means neither he nor Sergeant Naaman have explicit authority. Pay attention and learn to fill in the gaps of the information you have to hand.'

'Does that not mean that your seniority becomes relevant, sergeant?' asked Keliphon. 'Don't you have authority?'

'Yes it does,' said Naaman quietly. 'However, Sergeant Aquila has related orders from the company commander, so it doesn't matter which of us has the final say. Master Belial instructs us to patrol to the east, and that is what we are going to do. Contrary to any suspicions I may have, Master Belial has laid out the course of action we will follow.'

The Scouts acknowledged this information with nods. In silence they fell into line behind Naaman as he headed down the road with bolter in hand. He was content to leave the more rigid Chapter teachings to the Chaplains; he considered it his duty to introduce an element of flexible thinking to the recruits under his command. Intransigence and unthinking dogma did not encourage suitably fluid tactical thinking. Doctrine was the beginning of tactical awareness, not the end. For all that, he would be the last brother to suggest to the Scouts that the chain of command could be ignored – quite literally if the Chaplains ever heard that he had done such a thing.

They had covered about a mile when the sergeant spoke again.

'Of course, when we reach Indola, I will have the conversation with Sergeant Aquila again.'

'Do you think he will change his mind?' asked Kudin.

'Probably not. But remember the teachings of the Chaplains: stubbornness is a virtue. I may yet wear him down…'

Koth Ridge dropped down to the East Barrens, the rocky highland giving way to a gentler slope at the base of the main dormant volcano that formed the island of Kadillus. The Scouts continued along the highway as it stretched towards the horizon, cutting directly east through the fields of long grass. Low cloud smeared across the mountainside, blanketing everything with the hue of slate. Naaman heard the chatter of birds and the rustling of foraging animals. Insects buzzed across the tips of the grass stalks. The ever-present westerly wind rustled through patches of short, thorny bushes that sprouted haphazardly in the lee of rocks. Now and then he caught the scent of something decaying out of sight: the mouldering remains of those that had lost the tooth-and-claw fight for survival.

The edges of the road were littered with detritus from the main ork advance: piles of dung; discarded bones and food scraps; expended ammunition cases; oil cans; broken gears; bent nails; pieces of tattered clothing; sheared bolts; and various other pieces of rubbish whose origins and purpose could not be identified.

The road itself bore scars of the orkish progress. Weathered and cracked with age, the rockcrete was mark by skid marks of tyre rubber and the welts of heavy tracks. Potholes marked its surface where the tramp of ork feet and the ploughing of ork vehicles had caused parts of the road to subside.

And all about was the ever-present odour of the greenskins: a mustiness in the air that lingered in the nostrils and clung to clothes.

He ignored these background distractions, senses tuned for the abnormal, the irregular: signs of danger. The growl of the Ravenwing bikes had receded from hearing more than an hour ago, but the oil of their exhausts still hung in the air. He caught the distant stench of something fouler and waved the Scouts to leave the road and head northwards, following the source of the smell. A few hundred metres from the wide stripe of rockcrete, Keliphon signalled that he had found something. While Ras and Teldis stood watch with their sniper rifles, Naaman and the others investigated a swathe of flattened grass.

It had been trampled by many booted feet – undoubtedly a gang of orks had passed from the road on some unknown purpose. After following its course for a few minutes, Naaman came across an ork corpse. It was lying face down in the flattened grass, flies buzzing around it. The body had been stripped except for a few scraps of clothing. The exposed skin showed dozens of bloody wounds in the arms and back, as if the ork had been set upon by a number of foes. With his boot, Naaman turned the alien to its back. Gasses wheezed from the slashes to its chest and gut, causing the Scouts to turn away in disgust.

‘Look at it!’ snapped Naaman. The Scouts reluctantly obeyed, covering their mouths and noses with their hands. ‘What do you see?’

The Scouts crowded hesitantly around the body.

‘It’s dead,’ ventured Kudin.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Naaman.

‘Yes,’ the Scout replied. ‘Orks are rank when living, but this is decomposition. Experience says that ork wounds do not get infected. There is something in the blood which stops gangrene and other blood poisons. It is one of the things that makes them such dangerous foes.’

‘Good, Kudin.’ Naaman looked at the others. ‘Anything else?’

‘Its teeth are missing,’ said Gethan. The Scout bent closer to the creature’s face and pulled back its lips, exposing bare gums. ‘They even took its teeth.’

‘Who took its teeth?’ asked Naaman.

‘Whoever robbed it,’ replied Gethan. ‘The body’s been stripped of all armour and weapons, even the boots and teeth are gone. It looks like this one was set upon by others and killed, rather than falling dead and then being looted.’

‘There’s a strange substance in the wounds,’ said Keliphon. He pulled out his knife and scraped it over a gash in the ork’s chest. Strands of white fibrous mould clung to the blade.

‘Spores,’ said Naaman. ‘You’ll find them on all orkish dead. Ork bodies have to be burnt to ensure the spores do not spread. When this present threat is dealt with, the Free Militia will have to cleanse the whole area where the orks have been. I expect the docks in the city will have to be torched and rebuilt.’

‘What do the spores do?’ asked Ras.

Naaman looked at the crushed grass and saw its route bending back towards the road. It seemed likely that the ork, or a group of orks, had wandered away from the others and had been attacked. The robbery completed, the survivors had headed back to join the main body. There was nothing of significance here.

‘Form up to continue the patrol eastwards. We’ll stay off the road until nightfall.’

‘What do the spores do, sergeant?’ Ras asked again as the squad spread into an uneven line and set off through the waist-high grass.

‘I don’t know,’ Naaman replied. ‘Better to be sure with this sort of thing. All sorts of xenos breed in all sorts of ways. It is never a waste to eradicate all evidence of their presence after victory: their bodies, their constructions, their weapons. Utter annihilation ensures no regrets.’

With a last distasteful look at the deceased ork, Naaman set off after the squad

as the cloud-shrouded sun sank beneath the shoulder of Koth Ridge.

Darkness had enveloped the Scouts for more than two hours by the time they reached the tatty chainlink fence that marked the boundary of the disused Indola Mines. Poorly fastened, rusting sheet metal roofs rattled and creaked in the wind. The great lift tower over the mine shaft stood out against the semicircle of one of Piscina's three moons, the girders and gears a skeletal remnant of the industry that had once taken place here before the mine had been exhausted.

A yellow glow dominated the open space between the worker shacks and the remains of the ore storage houses. From the open doorway of a large building that had once housed the ore transporters, the light of lamps shone. Large shadows moved across the yellow glare, tall and bulky: Aquila's Ravenwing.

'Sergeant Naaman and squad moving to your position from the west,' Naaman broadcast over the comm. 'No enemy detected.'

'Outpost established in the vehicle maintenance hangar,' came Aquila's reply. 'No enemy detected by our sweep, either. No further patrols necessary until dawn. Rest your squad with us, Naaman.'

'Will join you shortly, Aquila,' Naaman finished. He cut the link and ghosted through the darkness, the Scouts behind him.

The bikes of the Ravenwing squadron were formed into a small laager inside the cavernous maintenance garage, arranged so that their lights – and forward-mounted twin bolters – were pointing towards the entrances. Aquila and his Space Marines had made a rough camp from the remains of parts crates and ore containers. Three of them sat hunched on these improvised seats while two of them did the rounds of the perimeter. Brother Aramis raised a hand in greeting as the Scouts emerged from the shadows. Naaman answered with a nod of his head and directed his squad to rest up.

Aquila looked across the hangar as Naaman entered the circle of light. The Ravenwing sergeant had taken off his helmet, revealing a narrow-cheeked face and sunken eyes. His shoulder-length hair was swept back by a silver band, decorated with a single black pearl at his brow. His right cheek was tattooed with a red rendition of the Dark Angels' winged blade insignia – the symbol of the Ravenwing. Anybody other than a Space Marine might have described him as darkly handsome. Such considerations never occurred to the Astartes.

'No unexpected second ork wave?' asked Aquila. The corner of his lips lifted in a slight smile. 'No green-skinned ambushers waiting for us?'

Naaman sat down opposite Aquila and smiled back.

‘Not today, at least,’ said the Scout-sergeant. ‘There is always tomorrow, of course.’

‘Of course,’ echoed Aquila. ‘Perhaps your missing orks were delayed by an important engagement. A society event, maybe?’

Naaman laughed at the image conjured in his mind. He had no idea about Aquila’s background before becoming a Dark Angel – the Scout-sergeant could little remember his own childhood – but he guessed from the sardonic wit that it had been very different from Naaman’s upbringing in the deserts of Kalabria. There had been no ‘society events’ that Naaman could recall, only a daily grind for survival.

‘Perhaps they protect their landing zone, expecting their army to return in victory,’ suggested Naaman.

‘Unlikely,’ replied Aquila. ‘Orks don’t strike me as the type to give up the chance to loot a city so that they can stand around guarding a ship.’

‘You’re right,’ sighed Naaman, conceding that his suspicions were entirely unfounded. ‘It seems that Master Belial will soon be able to send word to the Chapter of a notable victory over the orks.’

‘Ghazghkull, no less,’ added Brother Demael from Naaman’s right. The Scout-sergeant’s eyes widened with surprise. ‘We received word today that the ork forces are led by the Beast of Armageddon.’

‘That would be a prize for the Third Company, a grand prize indeed,’ said Naaman. He glanced at his companions before adding, ‘And the Ravenwing, of course.’

‘The Tenth shall share in the glory also,’ Aquila said generously, raising a fist in salute to Naaman. ‘The Beast of Armageddon, who escaped the Blood Angels, Salamanders and Ultramarines, now to be crushed by the might of the Dark Angels!’

‘All the more reason to ensure Ghazghkull has no means of escape,’ said Naaman. ‘He has proved elusive and cunning for an ork warlord. Let us not repeat the mistakes of other Chapters…’

‘The Beast is trapped in Kadillus Harbour, with the Third Company and almost the entirety of the defence force to keep him caged,’ said Brother Analeus, the Ravenwing squadron’s plasma gunner. ‘Ghazghkull’s an ork, not some wretched eldar! He won’t be getting off Piscina.’

‘I agree with you, brother, I really do,’ said Naaman, turning to face the Ravenwing Space Marine. ‘But to ensure that absolutely, would it not be better to secure the means by which he reached the planet in the first place?’

‘If he were to try to escape by ship, it would have to land at Northport on the outskirts of Kadillus Harbour,’ said Aquila. ‘That would be impossible.’

‘I am sure Commander Dante and the other noble leaders on Armageddon believed escape was impossible,’ said Naaman. ‘It is highly improbable; taking that ship would make it impossible.’

‘Why are you so determined to head east, Naaman?’ asked Analeus. ‘This could be interpreted as an unhealthy obsession.’

Naaman laughed again.

‘You are probably correct, brother,’ he said. The Scout-sergeant grew serious and glanced to his squad who were sat beside the rusting hulk of an old ore hauler. ‘Being in the Tenth Company engenders a certain obsession with obtaining all of the facts, no matter how inconsequential they turn out to be. We find it ensures the continued survival of our future battle-brothers.’

‘It is time to perform our evening dedications,’ announced Aquila, standing up. He looked at Naaman. ‘You and your squad are welcome to join us.’

‘That would be good, brother,’ said Naaman, also standing. He called to his squad to join them. ‘It would be wise not to leave ourselves without sentry, though. I will stand guard while you perform your dedications.’

‘You do not wish to join us, Naaman?’ The feeling of offence was clear in Aquila’s tone.

‘I will make my own dedications while I keep my watch,’ Naaman replied. ‘Tomorrow, one of your brothers can take the duty and I will make my dedications with you.’

Aquila seemed mollified by this reply and nodded. The two Space Marines walking sentry came into the hangar and Naaman left them kneeling in a circle as Aquila began to chant.

‘Today we served again under the watchful eye of the Emperor and the Lion. Today we lived again under the protection of the Emperor and the Lion. Today we fought again…’

Naaman allowed the words to drift from his attention as he stepped out into the night. He made his way to the rusting tower of the mine-workings and climbed a ladder to the first platform. From here he could see the whole of the Indola Mines. Unslinging his bolter, he began to pace around the platform, eyes scanning the darkness for any movement, ears tuning out the rasp of the wind and the creaking of the ramshackle buildings.

In his thoughts he gave praise to the Lion for the teachings he had passed on to the Dark Angels, the same teachings Naaman now passed on to future

generations of Space Marines. One in particular kept coming back to him: ‘Knowledge is power, guard it well.’ Knowledge. It was knowledge Naaman sought. Knowledge of how the orks had come to Piscina undetected; knowledge of how many of them were left outside the city; knowledge of what threat still remained. He paused in his slow circling and stared to the east.

Hundreds of square kilometres of wilderness stretched out in that direction; enough space to hide an army, certainly enough to hide a starship large enough to carry an army. The news that the foe they faced was Ghazghkull perturbed him. Ghazghkull was no ordinary warlord. News regarding his invasion of the world of Armageddon had been spread by the Ultramarines, Blood Angels and Salamanders, sent to every Chapter that would listen. That an ork warlord could cause so much havoc, inflict so much destruction and escape retribution was remarkable enough.

That he had continued to elude the Imperial forces sent in pursuit was almost unheard of. Such warmongering fiends only rarely disappeared, and always made some fatal mistake, either of overconfidence or out of sheer brutality. Ghazghkull had not only escaped the carnage of Armageddon, he had been able to rebuild his strength and stay ahead of the forces sent to destroy him. To appear here, hundreds of light years from where he was last seen, did not bode well.

Ghazghkull’s presence explained many things that had seemed incredible earlier, most particularly the single-minded nature of the orks’ attack on the city and their drive for control of the harbour. Master Belial believed he had Ghazghkull trapped, encircled by forces around the Kadillus Harbour power plant. Belial was not so sure Ghazghkull wasn’t exactly where he wanted to be. And if that was the case, it begged an answerable question: what did Ghazghkull want with a power plant?

Naaman took up his circuit again, troubled by his thoughts. Knowledge. Knowledge would see the Beast truly trapped, and that did not lie in Kadillus Harbour, but in the East Barrens, where the orks had come from.

The Scout-sergeant reached a decision. Come first light, no matter the arguments of Sergeant Aquila, Naaman and his Scouts would not be heading back to Koth Ridge. They would continue eastwards to find out what was there.

‘Enemy detected.’

At those two words buzzing in his ear from the comm-bead, Naaman was instantly awake. He scrambled to his feet, bolter in hand. A look around brought the pleasing sight of his squad alert and armed as well.

‘Movement to the north-east, three hundred metres.’

‘Will investigate,’ replied Naaman. ‘Stand by for report and orders.’

The sergeant nodded to his Scouts and the squad set off at a jog, out the doors of the hangar to cut through the buildings to the north. With a glance over his shoulder Naaman saw Brother Barakiel climbing down from his vantage point atop the maintenance shed. Picking up speed he led the Scouts to a long, low outbuilding close to the north-eastern part of the broken fence.

‘Confirm enemy and report,’ he said to Kudin.

Gethan slung his bolter and cupped his hands, acting as a step for Kudin as he pulled himself onto the flat roof of the shed. The senior Scout crossed with quiet footsteps and hunkered down, bringing the scope of his sniper rifle up to his eye. Naaman took position at the corner of the building and looked eastwards through the ragged links of the fence. The first fringes of dawn were touching the horizon and he could see the faint darker shapes in the gloom that had alerted Brother Barakiel.

‘Ten orks, advancing directly towards us,’ hissed Kudin. ‘Two hundred and fifty metres beyond the perimeter. No discernible formation or precaution. No other forces within sight.’

Naaman nodded to himself with satisfaction. By Kudin’s assessment, the orks were unaware of the Space Marines and were probably heading to the mine for some other reason. He activated the comm-bead.

‘Sergeant Naaman to Sergeant Aquila,’ he said.

The comm buzzed for a second.

‘This is Aquila,’ replied the Ravenwing sergeant. ‘What do you see?’

‘Small ork unit, ten-strong,’ said Naaman. ‘Threat minimal. We will engage from here with standard weapons. Suggest you engage when we begin firing.’

‘Affirm, Naaman,’ said Aquila. ‘We will use your fire to mask our engines and loop around from the south.’

‘Confirmed, Aquila.’

As Naaman cut the link, he ejected the magazine from his bolter and swapped the gas-propellant silent rounds with a cartridge of standard ammunition from his belt. He gestured for Keliphon to join Kudin on the roof with his sniper rifle, and for the three remaining squad members to take up positions within the shed; the metal sheets of the walls provided enough gaps to use as impromptu loopholes. The sergeant stayed where he was, resting his bolter against the corner of the building to steady his first shots.

They waited while the shapes in the darkness resolved into something more

discernible.

'One hundred and fifty metres,' reported Kudin.

In the pre-dawn still, Naaman could hear grunts and growls from the orks. He watched as they continued closer, utterly at ease, arms swinging, strutting through the grass on bowed legs.

'One hundred metres,' said Kudin.

'Engage,' Naaman calmly ordered his squad.

A *chuff-chuff* from the sniper rifles preceded the collapse of two of the greenskins; the orks thrashed in the grass as toxins coursed through their bloodstreams. Naaman pulled the trigger of his bolter, directing his fire at the closest ork, putting three rounds squarely into its chest. The flicker of other bolts broke the gloom. Some scored hits, others missed their mark and whined into the darkness.

The orks were thrown into disarray by the ambush. They brought up their crude automatic rifles and fired randomly, unsure of their attackers' location. Another one fell to sniper fire, his gun blazing in his dying grasp, spitting bullets in all directions. Naaman fired again, the hail of explosive bolts ripping the legs out from an ork as it turned on him.

The orks turned and ran, still firing at unseen foes, the bolts of the Scouts rasping after them. Above the cough of bolters, Naaman could hear the bass timbre of the Ravenwing's bikes. He saw them to his right, in a single line abreast, a moment before the riders switched on their lamps, bathing the orks with harsh white light. The orks continued to run, firing over their shoulders at the swiftly approaching bikers. Muzzle flare erupted from bike-mounted bolters, the hail scything through the few survivors of the Scouts' ambuscade.

The orks collapsed into the grass out of view. Aquila and his Ravenwing pulled out their pistols and continued to fire into the downed greenskins as they sped past, ably steering their bikes one-handed as they bounced and rocked over the uneven ground. At their head, Aquila slewed his bike around, churning up a cloud of dirt from the back wheel of his bike. He fired twice more as the Ravenwing circled and reformed into an arrowhead behind him.

The firing stopped and the only sound to cut the stillness was the noise of the bikes' engines. The Ravenwing followed their sergeant as his course curved towards the northern gate, his honour pennant streaming from a pole behind his saddle.

'Enemy destroyed,' Aquila reported.

'Confirm report,' Naaman said to Kudin. The Scout rose to one knee on the

roof and swept to the north and east with his scope.

'No enemy sighted. Confirm report,' he said.

'Stand down,' Naaman told his squad, bringing his bolter up across his chest. 'Return to camp.'

The hangar was hazy with the bikes' exhaust fumes, the *tick-tick-tick* of their cooling engines amplified by the metal walls. Aquila was still astride his bike, a cable from the long-range comm plugged into an opened armour panel on his left forearm. The others had dismounted and were performing post-battle rites on their machines: checking ammunition feeds, cleaning the gun barrels and applying Techmarine-blessed lubricants to the engines. Seeing that the Ravenwing were occupied, Naaman posted Ras and Kudin to stand guard outside.

Naaman sat on one of the crates and stripped out his bolter while he waited for Aquila to finish his report. He cleaned and reassembled the gun without thought, keeping one eye on the Ravenwing sergeant: for such a small engagement Aquila was spending a long time on the comm. Aquila was nodding occasionally and Naaman could see that his bike display was set to the digimap of the Koth Ridge region. Naaman had finished cleaning his bolter and was clicking replacement bolts into the magazine he had used by the time the Ravenwing sergeant pulled out the comm-cable and swung off his machine.

'Bad news, brother-sergeant?' asked Naaman as Aquila sat down next to him. The metal box sagged under the power-armoured Space Marine.

'A mix, brother-sergeant,' replied Aquila. He still wore his helm so Naaman could see nothing of his expression, but Aquila's slow speech suggested he was picking his words with care. 'Ours is the fifth report of such an encounter in the past three hours. There is a confirmed ork presence in the area east of Koth Ridge, but it is scattered and weak. No Dark Angels casualties suffered. It is Master Belial's assessment that we are encountering stragglers behind the main ork advance. We are to continue to sweep the region for other such survivors and exterminate them immediately.'

'I understand, brother-sergeant,' said Naaman, digesting this news. 'May I use your comm-unit, brother-sergeant?'

'For what purpose?'

'I wish to request a change to our orders so that we might continue further east in an attempt to locate the site of the ork landing zone. If we are able to do so, we can coordinate our coverage against further incursions more effectively.'

'Of course, brother-sergeant,' said Aquila, waving a hand towards his bike. 'Be

advised that the brother-captain is occupied with the reduction of the ork position in Kadillus Harbour. He may not think kindly of your wilder suspicions.'

'Thank you for the advice,' replied Naaman, crossing the hangar. 'It is not the brother-captain's kind thoughts I am after, merely his permission.'

Naaman hooked himself into the bike's comm-link and punched in the command frequency codes. He listened to static for a few seconds before Master Belial's curt tone cut through the interference.

'Company captain, identify,' said Belial.

'Veteran Sergeant Naaman of the Tenth Company, brother-captain,' said Naaman.

'You have something to add to Sergeant Aquila's report, brother-sergeant?'

'No, brother-captain. I am requesting to expand our patrol grid fifty kilometres to the east. It is my belief that we should locate the ork landing site as a priority.'

'I concur, Sergeant Naaman,' said Belial, to Naaman's slight surprise. 'Ork forces encountered may be guarding the landing site. If that is true, it suggests to me that the enemy ship is closer to Koth Ridge than I currently believe. A fifty-kilometre extension stretches our cordon too thinly. You may extend your patrol by twenty kilometres. If you have not discovered the landing zone within that distance, it is far enough from Koth Ridge to pose no immediate threat and can be dealt with once we have destroyed the orks in Kadillus Harbour. Confirm orders.'

'Extend patrol grid by twenty kilometres to the east, brother-captain,' said Naaman.

'Good. I want you to find out where these orks are coming from, Naaman. I will also extend patrol sweeps north of your position. Dedicate your duty to the Lion and the Emperor!'

'For the Lion I live, for the Emperor I die!' replied Naaman. The link buzzed in his ear. He cut the connection and unplugged his headset. Naaman directed a smile at Aquila. 'Updated orders, brother-sergeant. We head east!'

Three hours after dawn, Naaman and his squad were occupying a hillock that rose over two hundred metres above the plains beyond Indola. From here he could see the East Barrens all the way to the horizon, the seemingly endless grassland devoid of road or settlement. It was broken by scattered upthrusts of rock like the one on which he stood: the remnants of millennia-dormant volcanic eruptions that had once wracked the whole of Kadillus in the pre-history of

Piscina IV.

Bringing his monocular up to his eye, he swept to the left and right, seeking any sign of the ork ship. He found no landing site, but he did detect a haze of smoke a few kilometres to the south. He adjusted the monocular's display and took a range reading: two-point-five kilometres. Too far to be Aquila's squad. He activated his comm-set.

'Sergeant Aquila, are you receiving my signal?'

The Ravenwing sergeant's reply was faint, almost drowned out by the hiss of distance interference. He was obviously at the limit of Naaman's comm range.

'Please confirm your location, brother-sergeant.'

There was a pause while Aquila checked his position.

'We're one-four kilometres from Indola, vector nine-two-zero-eight. Have you found something, Naaman?'

The veteran sergeant checked the monocular again. Two ork buggies plunged through the grass, bouncing wildly over the uneven ground, their thick tyres gouging furrows in the dirt. He could not yet make out the details, but there was some kind of heavy weapon mounted on each buggy. He rechecked the range and heading in the monocular display.

'Confirm visual contact. Two enemy light vehicles. Wheeled. Heavy weapon-armed. Location one-six kilometres from Indola, vector eight-three-five-five. Enemy heading almost directly westwards. They will pass us about three kilometres to the south. Too far for us to intercept.'

'Confirm report, brother-sergeant.' The dry words of the communications protocols did not mask Aquila's apparent delight. 'Have calculated intercept route. No assistance required. Proceed to the twenty-kilometre patrol limit. Will inform you of engagement outcome. Good eyes, Naaman.'

'Confirm, brother-sergeant. *Raptorum est, fraternis eternitas*. Good hunting.'

Naaman switched off the transmission and clipped the monocular back into its pouch at his waist. He waved the squad to their feet.

'Continue to patrol eastwards,' he told them, setting off from the brow of the hill.

'Are we not going to engage the orks, brother-sergeant?' asked Teldis.

'That is not our duty, *Scout* Teldis,' Naaman replied. 'This is the reason we have been paired with Sergeant Aquila's squad. We provide the reconnaissance and he provides the mobility and firepower. Would you like to try running after those buggies? I do not think they will wait for you to catch up.'

As they walked down the slope at brisk pace, Naaman felt another 'teaching'

coming on. Eyes still scanning the landscape for signs of the orks, he took a deep breath.

'The Astartes are the culmination of the application of precise force,' he quoted from the *Book of Caliban*, written by the Dark Angels' primarch ten thousand years before. Naaman had heard it so many times, and repeated it almost as often, he entered an almost trance-like state of recollection. 'Through careful consideration of the enemy and the strategic situation, the Astartes commander must conclude the most effective targets for the application of that precise force. It is with offensive, pre-emptive action that the Astartes achieve victory. Central to this assessment must be the gathering of all relevant intelligence pertaining to the enemy's abilities, resources and disposition. There are many means which can be employed in the gathering of these data.

'From orbit, starship-based augurs can detect large population centres; the movement of sizeable bodies of troops; energy networks; vehicle columns; and static defences. On the ground, scanning devices can detect thermal, radioactive, laser, microwave and other energy-based signatures. They can detect sound and vibration, even changes in aquatic temperature and air currents. A number of such devices used in concert may triangulate their findings to determine the enemy position. Even the humble tripwire is a detector that can be employed in this information-gathering.

'But for all the capabilities of these technological marvels, there is a singular truth that all Astartes commanders must accept. This truth is that there is no intelligence greater or more accurate than the testimony of an Astartes looking upon the enemy with his own eyes.'

His verbatim recital concluded, Naaman looked at his Scouts and saw the understanding in their expressions.

'You, my young brothers,' he said, 'are the greatest and most accurate means for detecting the enemy. The Lion said that. When you become battle-brothers and are eager to engage the enemy, remember these words and pay attention to the reports of the Scouts.'

As sunset approached, Naaman and his squad moved northwards along the twenty-kilometre limit of their patrol. They had directed the ferocity of the Ravenwing against the orks twice more that afternoon, spotting two bands of greenskins moving westwards on foot. With the light failing, Naaman signalled a rendezvous point to Aquila and the Scouts set up an observation post on an outcropping of rock. With the thermal scopes of their rifles, Kudin and Keliphon

kept watch as night descended. Naaman shared the squad's ration of protein bars and they took cover from the strengthening wind in the lee of the rocks.

The growl of the Ravenwing's engines broke the quiet dark just before midnight. With lights off, the bikers steered through the night using the enhanced vision of their autosenses. Kudin spotted the exhaust plumes of the squad as they approached from the south.

'Squad Aquila, this is Sergeant Naaman. Confirm your approach on our position.'

'Sergeant Naaman, this is Aquila. Confirm approach on your position from the south. One kilometre distant. Have received updated intelligence on enemy activity. Be ready to receive a briefing on my arrival.'

'Confirm, Aquila,' replied Naaman, curious to know what new information had come to light. Perhaps another of the Scout or Ravenwing squads searching the East Barrens had found the ork ship.

It was with some impatience that Naaman waited for Aquila and his bikers. They drove into the shelter of the rocks without comment, and attended to the maintenance of their machines before Aquila gestured for Naaman to join him a short distance away.

'Greetings, brother-sergeant,' said Naaman. 'You do honour to your company and the Chapter with your deeds today.'

'Master Belial contacted me an hour ago, with some grim news,' said Aquila, dispensing with the customary preamble. 'He has lost contact with three patrols on duty east of Koth Ridge. Two Scout squads and one Ravenwing land speeder have failed to report their positions. All three had sporadic enemy contacts throughout the day, increasing in frequency towards nightfall.'

'Failure to report does not mean our brothers are dead,' said Naaman, absorbing this sombre information. 'There is communication interference in Kadillus Harbour, perhaps the orks have some similar device on their ship.'

'That is a possibility,' said Aquila. The Ravenwing sergeant turned his gaze to the north. 'It is the brother-captain's assessment that these patrols have discovered the location of the ork landing site. Whether due to range, interference or enemy activity, the patrols have been unable to pass on this information. Master Belial has analysed the patrol patterns and believes the ork ship to be located roughly thirty kilometres north-east of where we are. Our orders are to investigate this potential site, attempt to make contact with the Dark Angels forces in the area, and confirm the presence and strength of the enemy.'

'We will set out straight away,' said Naaman, stepping towards the others.

Aquila halted him with a hand on the Scout-sergeant's arm.

'There is something else I wish to bring to your attention, Naaman,' said Aquila. 'A matter has been puzzling me these last few hours.'

'Speak freely, Aquila. I will do what I can to make any matter clearer.'

'Seeing you and your charges brought back to me memories of my own time in the Tenth Company. In particular, it reminded of something my sergeant told us: notice not that which is the same, but that which is different.'

'A good lesson, no doubt. It is the breaking of patterns, the irregularities observed, which convey the most information. Have you seen something?'

'I do not know if it is important or not. The orks I have killed today appear different in dress and armament in comparison to those at Kadillus Harbour. Amongst their usual garb, the orks fighting under Ghazghkull display a preference for bold patterns of black, white and red. The ork corpses I have examined after today's encounters wear yellow and orange. I do not understand the significance of this.'

Naaman paced for a moment, pondering the importance of this discovery.

'I have no clear answers for you, but I can add my own speculation if you wish.'

'Please do.'

'I am no expert on ork markings, but from what I understand, colours and symbols are often used to denote allegiance. I would take this to mean that Ghazghkull's force has assimilated several smaller factions under his command. Perhaps these yellow-clad orks are somehow out of favour with their chieftain, hence why they were left behind to guard the ork ship? An alternative theory could be that having been abandoned by their commander, the orks left at the landing site have chosen to form their own faction and split from the main command of Ghazghkull. Ork influence is enforced purely by proximity and physical action. These orks may well have grown bored protecting their ship and are now heading west in search of loot and battle.'

Aquila tapped his fingers against the back of his other hand as he considered this.

'I can see no argument why either of these theories directly impacts on our orders. Observations confirm that the remaining orks outside of Kadillus Harbour have been steadily moving westwards. It may be the case that the landing site is no longer contested. It would be reasonable to assume that this movement would quickly peak as those left behind realise they have been abandoned and set off after the rest of their forces. Perhaps it is this peak in

activity that our patrols encountered?'

'That is a distinct possibility. However, we should still proceed with some caution. Orks are unpredictable even in normal circumstances. Given that these orks appear to have no solid leadership, they could be roaming the wilderness at random and the movement westwards only a general trend rather than an absolute.'

'I agree. My squad will provide a roving support while your Scouts move on the objective. *Corvus vigilus*. Separation to be no greater than one kilometre, standard high-risk theatre contact procedures.'

'Confirm. "Alert Raven" formation with one-kilometre separation. We'll watch each other's backs.'

Aquila nodded and held up his fist in salute.

'For the Lion!' he barked.

'For the Lion!' echoed Naaman.

The Scout-sergeant called Kudin to form up the squad while Aquila moved back to the Ravenwing and passed on the plan. The bikers mounted up a few seconds later and were already roaring northwards as Naaman rejoined his Scouts.

'We have a new objective,' he told them as they performed their weapons checks. 'No rest for us. We are heading north-east, night march. From this moment on, the East Barrens are to be considered extremely hostile territory. If you see anything – anything – that looks out of the ordinary, you signal the squad. You will all halt and take cover until I have assessed the threat.'

Naaman walked up and down the line, emphasising his instructions with chopping motions.

'We keep silent. Watch your sector and trust the rest of the squad to watch theirs. No one is to open fire without my order. We will be moving at pace without lights, so equip nightsight goggles and watch your footing.'

He stopped and addressed his next words to Kudin in particular.

'If I fall, you are to immediately withdraw from any engagement when it is safe to do so. You will then head directly back and report to our Chapter forces on Koth Ridge. It may be that some squads have already been lost. There is no asset to protect, no objective that needs to be taken and no civilians to watch over. This is a reconnaissance mission, not a search-and-destroy. Should we encounter stiff resistance, we will withdraw with whatever intelligence we have gained. It is vital, and I mean vital, that Master Belial has as much information as possible regarding ork activity in this area. The only way he can receive that information

is if you are alive to deliver it.'

Kudin, Ras and Keliphon nodded their understanding. Gethan and Teldis looked worried. Naaman laid his hands on the shoulders of the squad's youngest members.

'These orders are precautionary,' he told them. 'I have been a Dark Angels Space Marine for one hundred and seventy-four years, the last twenty-six years of which I have spent with the Tenth Company. I have not achieved the rank of veteran sergeant by letting myself get killed.'

The Scouts chuckled at the poor joke but they became serious again when Naaman waved them to begin the march. He fell in at the back of the squad as they set off at a trot, breath puffing mist in the cold air. The sergeant activated the comm-link to Aquila.

'Aquila, this is Naaman. We are on the move towards the objective. Any contact?'

'Negative contact, brother-sergeant,' replied Aquila. 'You are clear for the next kilometre.'

Naaman called the squad to a halt just after dawn. They had reached the intended objective without further encounters with the orks, which vexed the Scout-sergeant. Ahead, the ground heaped up in a series of increasingly steep creases caused by some great seismic shift in a past age. The slopes appeared clear of enemy and a brief look with the monocular revealed no telltale smoke clouds or other evidence of ork activity.

'Aquila, this is Naaman. Do you think we have passed through the ork line in the dark? I see nothing here.'

'Naaman, this is Aquila. We are north of your position, detect no enemy. The landing site is not here. We will withdraw in the direction of Koth Ridge and report our lack of success. There is no secondary ork force.'

'Negative, brother-sergeant. We will continue east. Better to return with solid intelligence than an absence of it.'

'Those are not our orders, Naaman! Master Belial commanded us to investigate this gridpoint. We have done so and it is our duty to return and report the lack of significant ork forces. We will receive fresh orders from the company captain. If he agrees with your assessment, we will return and continue further east.'

'I cannot comply with that assessment, brother-sergeant,' said Naaman, walking away from his squad, voice terse. 'It is a day on foot back to Koth Ridge. To return for fresh orders will delay our search by two days. That is too great a

window of uncertainty. As the senior sergeant in action, I am exercising my authority to continue the patrol.'

'Your decision is in error, Naaman. We have already lost forces without report in this region. Master Belial is depending upon us to return with our reports as soon as possible. If further investigation is needed, the company commander will issue those orders. You should make your representations to Master Belial and allow him to decide the best course of action.'

'We have found no evidence of the enemy, nor any evidence that sheds light on the fate of our missing battle-brothers. To withdraw now is premature, Aquila. Let me make my position clear. I *will* lead my squad further east. I am requesting your continued fire support in this move, but if you choose to withdraw it will not affect my decision and we will proceed without support. We are the Tenth Company, we are prepared for such operations.'

There came a growl in reply. Naaman did not wish to put Aquila in this difficult position, but he was intent on discovering what had happened to the other Dark Angels patrols. If that meant the Scouts would go on alone, he was comfortable with the consequences.

'As you say, Naaman. *Persona obstinatum*! I will delay withdrawal and continue in support. It will not be said that Squad Aquila abandoned their brethren of the Tenth Company. I must insist that you agree to an extension of no more than six hours. If we find nothing in that time, you must concede that there is nothing to find.'

'You have my agreement, brother-sergeant. Thank you for indulging my curiosity and caution. The Lion's spirit lives on within.'

'I will raise this matter with Master Belial when we return. I do not think your behaviour befits the position you hold.'

'I understand, Aquila, and I appreciate your candour. I will accept full responsibility for my decision.'

'Good. Now that we have settled this, let us make sure nothing untoward happens.'

'I agree. I hope that you are right and I am wrong, brother-sergeant.'

Naaman killed the link and walked back to his squad.

'We will head for that first ridgeline. I want to have an observation post there by noon. Ready for march.'

Naaman glared at the rising ground ahead, as if his stare alone could force it to yield its secrets. There was more happening on Piscina than he or anybody else could guess; of that he was certain. There were more orks here, of that he was

equally certain. He just had to find them.

Two hours on, Naaman and his squad were halfway to the line of hills breaking up the East Barrens. Other than the routine check-in comms, he had not conducted any further exchanges with Aquila, so it came as a surprise when the comm buzzed in his ear.

'Naaman, this is Aquila. Direct your attention south-east of your current position. What do you see on the ridgeline?'

Naaman took out his monocular and looked along the line of hills from left to right. With the first sweep he saw nothing. Knowing that Aquila would not have contacted him for confirmation without being sure there was something to see, Naaman swept the hill again.

He stopped, adjusting the focus. There was a dark haze rising from behind the hills in the direction Aquila had suggested. It was being quickly dispersed by the strong wind pushing over the ridge, but it was definitely there.

'Aquila, this is Naaman. It looks like heat haze and possible exhaust pollution. Is that what you are seeing?'

'Confirm, brother-sergeant. The location appears to correlate roughly to the position of the East Barrens geothermal site.'

'Another energy plant? What would the orks want with that?'

'I would not hazard an opinion on the subject, brother-sergeant. It is a confirmed ork presence. We should withdraw and report.'

'It could just be smouldering buildings, burnt while the orks advanced. We haven't confirmed anything yet, Aquila. It is only a few kilometres away.'

'Is there any point in debating this, Naaman?'

'None, brother-sergeant. Let us go and have a look.'

The comm crackled loudly as Aquila sighed.

'All right, Naaman. We'll take the lead, follow us up the ridge.'

'Confirm, brother-sergeant. We are heading off now.'

The Scouts crossed the broken ground at speed, dispersed in a wide formation, weapons ready. Naaman kept glancing in the direction of the mysterious haze to confirm its location. After they had covered a little more than a kilometre, he called the squad to an abrupt halt. There was something strange about the scattered smoke. He used the monocular again to fix on the drifting cloud. It was darker, heavier. The wind did not seem to have altered, so the greater concentration of fumes meant one of two things. Either the source was growing stronger, or the source was coming closer…

Naaman swung the monocular sight across the ridgeline, looking for Aquila's squad. He found them on the third attempt, riding slowly up a rocky ravine about half a kilometre from the crest, two kilometres ahead of the Scouts. Naaman urgently activated the comm, still staring through the monocular.

'Pull back, Aquila!'

There was a frustrating delay before Aquila answered. The Ravenwing squadron were disappearing behind a lip of rock.

'Naaman, this is Aquila. Repeat your last communication.'

Naaman took a deep breath, aware that his squad were watching him closely. His hearts were already beating rapidly, blood and hormones surging through his system, readying him for battle. He had to keep calm and clear.

'Aquila, this is Naaman. The cloud is exhaust fume. I believe a sizeable ork force, including motorised elements, is beyond the ridge and moving in our direction.'

'Confirm, brother-sergeant. What is your estimate of enemy force size?'

'Inconclusive. Prevailing wind speed is dispersing the cloud. Accounting for the general pollution level of ork engines, I think there are several vehicles in close proximity to each other.'

'Sergeant Naaman!' The call came from Kudin, who was looking through his sniper scope at a point on the ridgeline almost directly east of the Scouts. 'Enemy sighted!'

'Withdraw from your position, brother-sergeant,' Naaman snapped over the comm even as he redirected his monocular towards the area where Kudin was keeping watch. 'Enemy approaching from north of your position.'

Coming over the ridge were several dozen orks on foot. Naaman's attention was wrenched back to the right by the crack of a large detonation. A plume of fire and smoke issued from the gorge where the Ravenwing were advancing.

'Enemy ambush!' Aquila snarled over the comm. Gunfire rattled along the hillside, quickly drowned out by the thudding thrum of bolters echoing along the cleft. 'They were waiting at the head of the gulley with tripmines and grenades. Brother Carminael is dead, bike destroyed. No assistance required.'

Another explosion rocked the ridgeline. Naaman snapped his attention back to the orks advancing over the hills. There were at least fifty of them now, some of them heavily armoured and armed. The orks continued down the ridge, a spreading blot of green and yellow.

'Enemy attackers destroyed, withdrawing to your position,' reported Aquila.

'Negative, Aquila. The orks have not seen us yet. Do not draw attention to our

position. We will withdraw undetected. Rendezvous two kilometres west of our position.'

'Confirm, Naaman. Two kilometres west.'

'Squad, listen,' said Naaman, quiet but insistent. 'You will withdraw immediately and directly to the west. Join up with Squad Aquila at two kilometres.'

'What are you going to do, sergeant?' asked Teldis.

'I will continue to make observations of the enemy,' said Naaman. 'I will rejoin you shortly. Move out!'

The Scout-sergeant hadn't moved his eye from the monocular throughout the exchanges. As he heard the Scouts moving away across the rocky ground, he switched back to the smoke cloud. It was certainly denser and a few individual plumes could be seen. The vehicles were almost at the ridgeline. He just needed to hold on for a minute or two to get an idea of the orks' strength.

The foremost gangs of orks on foot were now less than half a kilometre away.

Naaman unrolled his cameleoline cloak and fastened it to his shoulder guards. Drawing up the hood, he pulled the cloak over his arm and settled behind a rock, monocular in one hand, bolter in the other.

He checked on the progress of the vehicles. Three bikes had broken over the ridge, smoke dribbling from their twin exhausts. Behind them trundled two flat-bed transports, their open backs filled with green-skinned warriors. There was more smoke behind them, coming from other vehicles that were still out of sight.

The orks on foot were four hundred metres away.

The greenskins glared warily along the ridge, guns in their clawed hands, alerted by the attack on Aquila's squadron. Naaman lowered himself to his stomach and looked back at the crest. The column of ork infantry seemed to be all in view, a few less than one hundred of them. There was no way of knowing if more were following unless he stayed here and waited for them.

The rumble of engines reverberated along the rocky ridge from the south. A motor with a deeper timbre grew in volume. Naaman glanced to his right as he slithered back from his observation position. A larger vehicle crested the hill, its front bedecked with pintle- and turret-mounted guns. Half a dozen orks stood in its back, wearing brightly painted, heavy armour plates. Through the monocular Naaman could see wisps of smoke trailing from exhausts on their backs, the armour powered by spluttering engines.

Naaman was about to lower the monocular and move away when he noticed one of the armoured orks was much larger than the rest. It was a gigantic beast,

yellow armour decorated with black flames, a long banner stitched with ork glyphs hanging from a banner pole on its back. It was another warlord!

With his other eye, he saw the nearest orks were now only two hundred metres away. It was time to leave.

Slipping away through the rough bushes, Naaman shook his head at what he had seen. There was no mistaking it. Another warlord could only mean one thing – there were two ork armies on Piscina. Though there was no way of telling how strong this second force was or what their connection was to the army in Kadillus Harbour, Master Belial had to be told this news. The orks were clearly marching on Koth Ridge; the earlier encounters must have been advance parties, rather than stragglers. Koth Ridge was held mostly by the Piscina Free Militia, with only a couple of Dark Angels squads in support. It was vital that the defensive line was reinforced.

Wrapped in his camouflaging cloak, Naaman broke into a crouched run, heading down the slope as fast as he dared. The bikes to the south were already level with his position, the trucks and battlewagon not far behind. Ahead, a cluster of boulders broke the thin soil. Naaman took cover between two of the upthrusting rocks and turned to face the orks. They were coming at him at some speed, though he was sure he had not been seen.

It was time to slow them down.

He levelled his bolter on top of one of the boulders and took aim at a cluster of three orks near the centre of the group. The bolter coughed in his hand, the gas-propelled bolts zipping soundlessly through the air. Their standard warheads replaced with a heavy mercury core, the stalker bolts punched silently through the padded armour and flesh of the orks. Two of them dropped immediately, the third fell to one knee, blood spurting from a wound in its shoulder.

The sudden attack sent the orks into confusion. Many of them dropped down and began firing at random patches of cover. Others flung themselves onto the rocks, their panicked warning shouts carrying as far as Naaman, who smiled grimly to himself. A few of the leaders began bellowing orders, pointing this way and that, sending their underlings scurrying behind bushes and boulders with little sense of order or discipline.

‘Dumb brutes,’ Naaman muttered, slinging the bolter strap over his shoulder.

Satisfied the orks would be sufficiently delayed, Naaman backed out of his place of cover and continued down the slope at a brisk march, breaking into a run as he reached the level plain.

‘Why must you continually disagree with me, Naaman?’ snarled Aquila. ‘Your contrariness would stretch the patience of the Lion.’

It was mid-afternoon and the orks were pouring westwards in increasing numbers. The greenskins did not appear to be advancing with any particular cohesion. For two hours, Naaman and Aquila had led their squads in careful retreat towards Koth Ridge. As the sun sank into dusk, it was clear to Naaman that his Scouts could not outpace the ork vehicles following them. Naaman had requested the conference with his fellow sergeant and told Aquila to leave the Scouts behind.

‘The information we have gained is too vital to risk, brother-sergeant,’ Naaman said. ‘You must get within transmission range of Koth Ridge and give them warning of the ork attack.’

‘It goes against my honour to leave you without protection,’ argued Aquila. ‘We are only ten kilometres from communication range. You can keep ahead of the orks until that point is reached.’

‘And would give those on Koth Ridge less time to prepare their defences,’ Naaman said, pacing impatiently. The lead ork squadrons were only a kilometre or two behind and catching up swiftly. ‘Aquila, my brother, your duty is clear. If nothing else, we will be able to elude the orks better without the presence of your bikes to attract attention. If you really wish to help, strike against the orks and lead their pursuit northwards. At the moment we are being forced too far south and will be cut off from Koth Ridge if we continue in this direction.’

‘I see the merit in your suggestion, brother-sergeant,’ Aquila said slowly, mulling over the idea. ‘We will perform a diversionary attack and withdraw to communications range. Once I have relayed our intelligence to Master Belial, we will return and cover the rest of your withdrawal.’

‘That won’t be necessary, brother. Your energy would be better spent defending Koth Ridge against the orks. If the line fails, it would reverse all of our victories so far.’

Aquila’s head swayed left and right for a moment, the sergeant conflicted between the possible courses of action. Aquila said nothing as he strode back to his bike and signalled for his squad to move west. The bike’s engine growled into life and the comm crackled.

‘The Lion will protect,’ said Aquila.

‘May the Dark Angel speed you upon his wings,’ replied Naaman as he watched the Ravenwing ride off into the growing gloom.

With the distraction of the Ravenwing squadron removed, Naaman set about

analysing the situation. The orks would not reach Koth Ridge before daybreak. The coming night would be the best cover his squad could ask for, and it was likely the orks would make camp during the hours of darkness. Twice already he had seen warbikes and ork buggies in the distance, roaming freely across the plains. They did not appear to be searching for Naaman's squad in particular, but they clearly knew that there were Space Marine forces in the area. With dozens of vehicles following behind, it was crucial that the ork patrols did not raise the alarm. If that happened, it would only be a matter of time before the pursuing greenskins caught up with the Scouts.

Naaman wanted to move directly west, straight to Koth Ridge, but the ground was far too open; the rock of Kadillus pushed through the grasslands like a bald patch, offering no vegetation or other cover. The Scouts would have to circle the rocky flats to the south, until nightfall at least, when Naaman would reconsider the plan.

Reaching his decision, Naaman passed on his orders to the squad and they set out a fast pace, eager to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the orks while the sun was still in the sky.

The march took on a watchful monotony: run, stop, scan the surrounds, run again. For minutes into hours, for kilometre after kilometre, the Scouts ran.

They ran without great pause for three hours, hugging the shallow folds in the plains to avoid being seen. Now and then they took cover, hunkering down in the long grass as one or other of the squad spied ork vehicles coming closer. So often had Naaman heard the distant growl of engines, he hardly paid it any mind any more. Only when he detected a change in volume that indicated vehicles approaching did he truly become aware of the noise.

As the afternoon turned to ruddy evening, the distant heights of Koth Ridge were silhouetted against the setting sun. The craggy spur rose up against the red sky like a wall, still too distant to make out anything of the defence force and Space Marines standing guard there. Naaman offered a prayer to the Lion, hoping that Aquila and his squad had evaded the orks and spread the warning of the massive greenskin advance.

Searchlights and lamps broke the gloom of nightfall, giving Naaman a clear idea of exactly where the ork forces were in relation to his position. Some distance behind, other lights, including the flickering orange of fires, sprang into life across the East Barrens. Looking at the glow that lit the early night sky, he realised just how many orks there were: thousands of them. The bulk of

movement was to the north, but the flash of headlights and the sporadic chatter of exuberant weapons fire betrayed a group of several vehicles almost directly behind Naaman's line of advance.

He was still cautious about turning north; that would put him and his squad squarely in front of the main ork thrust. Heading south was not much of a better option: too far in that direction and the Scouts would come up against the kilometre-deep, near-vertical Koth Gorge. Even if they negotiated that obstacle, the route would take them to the coast rather than Koth Ridge. For better or worse, the only option seemed to be to keep heading west in the hope that orks following behind would stop or change course. Naaman resolved to himself that if the orks came within half a kilometre, they would dig slit trenches and take cover; the orks might miss them in the darkness and if they didn't, at least the Scouts would have a rough position to defend.

Two hours after the sun had settled behind Koth Ridge and was nothing more than the slightest glow in the west, Naaman was feeling slightly vindicated. The orks coming up from the rear had gradually bent their course northwards to join the rest of their force, passing the Scouts more than a kilometre away. Though there was light and exhaust smoke far ahead of the Scouts, it seemed to Naaman that they now had a clear run to Koth Ridge. If they kept up their current pace – and there was no reason they could not – they would be amongst the rocks and gulleys before dawn.

The grasslands of the plains were thinning. Patches of heather and stubby bushes broke the swaying sea of long stems. The ground had started to slope gently upwards and Naaman judged it to be no more than another three kilometres to Koth Ridge proper. It was still dark; Piscina's moons had set and it would be another two hours until dawn coloured the eastern sky. The air was chill but Naaman barely noticed, the cold registering as an abstract environmental factor rather than something he actually *felt*. It was the same with the fatigue from the constant running. His arms and legs pumped methodically, his limbs a separate entity from his conscious mind. There was no pain, no shortness of breath, no cramp or dizziness that a normal man might have suffered.

The Scouts were not so physically blessed, each feeling the strain depending upon his implants and development. Kudin ran as effortlessly as Naaman; Ras and Keliphon were breathing heavily but were keeping pace; Teldis and Gethan showed the worst signs of their exertions. Their faces were red, their strides short, perspiration soaking their uniforms. For all the hardship, neither had

offered any complaint or asked for a rest. That was good, because the will to continue was every bit as important as the body's ability to carry on.

Nobody spoke. Each watched his sector with gun ready, but there was nothing to report. It seemed that they had left the orks a kilometre or two behind. Naaman was unsettled by the quiet, particularly the silence of the comm. Although he was not within transmission range, he had expected to be able to receive command signals at this range from Koth Ridge, but he heard nothing. It occurred to him that Aquila might have done something foolhardy and allowed his squad to be cornered by the orks before sending the warning of the ork advance.

'Sergeant!' Keliphon's hushed voice cut through Naaman's thoughts. The Scout was at the rear of the squad and had stopped, sniper rifle raised to his shoulder.

'Squad, halt here,' snapped Naaman. 'Keep watch. Make your report, Scout Keliphon.'

'I thought I heard an engine, sergeant.'

Naaman walked back and stopped next to the crouching Scout.

'You heard an engine, or you did not hear an engine?' he asked.

'I heard an engine, sergeant,' Keliphon said with more confidence. 'Behind us.'

'Distance? Size?'

'I do not know, sergeant. I can see a thermal haze in that direction.' The Scout pointed towards a dip in the plains the Scouts had passed a few minutes previously. Naaman was pulling his monocular from his belt when the Scout continued, voice tense. 'I see them! Three ork vehicles. Two flatbed transports. Single armoured battlewagon. No bikes or infantry. They are coming directly at us!'

Naaman could see nothing with his naked eye, even though the sight of a Space Marine was as good in low light as a normal man's at noon. The orks were driving without lights. Were they deliberately hunting the Scouts? He looked through the monocular and confirmed what Keliphon had reported: three ork vehicles catching up with them, crammed full of ork warriors.

Naaman looked around for the best defensive position. There was a stand of low trees a few hundred metres to his right, and a narrow stream cut down from the ridge thirty metres to his left. The trees would take them further from the orks' probable route of advance, and provide some visual cover, but the wiry, twisted trunks and branches offered little physical protection. The stream cut at least a metre deep and bushes lined the side, but it went directly across the orks' projected course. Naaman made a last sweep with the monocular and assured

himself that there were no other ork forces close at hand. If the Scouts were discovered, they would only face the three vehicles and their belligerent cargo.

Collapsing the monocular and stowing it away, he made his decision.

'Into the stream bed, four-metre dispersal, snipers front and back!'

They covered the ground at a sprint and splashed into the brook, which was about three metres wide but barely covered the tops of their boots. Naaman led the squad a little further upstream, where the water curved around a boulder and cut to the south for a short distance, almost perpendicular to the ork advance.

'We cannot allow the enemy to get between us and Koth Ridge,' Naaman told his Scouts. 'We will wait for the enemy to pass us and engage them from the rear. If the Free Militia on the ridge are paying attention, they may even see the fight and send assistance.'

The Scouts nodded, wide-eyed and filled with adrenaline. They took up their positions, using clumps of grass and bushes to conceal their weapons, crouched against the waist-high mud bank. Peering between the fronds of a plant, Naaman watched the orks, his bolter resting on the bank in front of him. The enemy were three hundred metres away and approaching at a reasonable speed. This was no reckless dash for Koth Ridge, this was a considered advance. The idea of orks showing this kind of circumspection unsettled the Scout-sergeant. Orks were dangerous enough without them actually thinking.

Naaman could feel the ground trembling as the vehicles came closer and closer. The heaviest was a slab-sided half-track with a driver's cabin on the right-hand side, an open turret sporting a long-barrelled cannon on the left. There was a rickety gantry behind on which stood two orks holding guns strapped to a rail. Behind them, above the tracks, over a dozen more orks hunched behind the metal sides of the troop compartment, peering over the side, guns in hand. Smoke billowed from a cluster of exhausts along the far side, dirt sprayed from the tracks in the transport's wake.

The other two vehicles were about half the size, with four balloon-tyre wheels that churned through the mud and grass. He could see the drivers hunched in a wide compartment at the front of each, a gunner beside them standing behind a pintle-mounted weapon. Ammunition belts trailed onto the open deck behind, where more orks squatted close together, their helmeted heads turning this way and that as they kept a lookout for enemies. As they came nearer he could hear the guttural chatter of the greenskins among the noise of engines.

The battlewagon crossed the stream bed about fifty metres upriver, crashing across the gap without halting. The trucks found it harder going. One driver

revved the engine in a huge cloud of black smoke and tried to jump the gap. This met with mixed success: the truck surged into the river and smashed into the far bank, tyres ripping through dirt and plants, dragging the vehicle free as half the orks on board tumbled out of the back. The second truck approached more cautiously and bellied into the water with a loud shriek of tearing metal. It stayed there, smoke dribbling from the exhausts. Naaman guessed an axle had snapped.

There followed an argument punctuated by shouts, punches and kicks, which culminated in the orks deciding to abandon the vehicle and continue on foot. Naaman gave the order to open fire as the last of them were scrambling up the opposite bank.

Bolts screeched into the orks' exposed backs, blowing out chunks of flesh, shattering spines and ripping off limbs. Naaman directed his fire onto the abandoned truck, stitching a line of explosions across its flank until something ignited. Flames crackled, and with an explosion that sent a ball of fire dozens of metres into the air, a fuel tank exploded. Pieces of armour and chassis scythed through the nearby orks. The waters of the stream swirled with thick blood.

It was difficult to see what had happened to the battlewagon: it was lost behind the pall of smoke streaming from the exploded transport. The other truck turned around and drove straight at the Scouts, skidding across the grass, the gunner spraying a hail of bullets at the bank.

Teldis gave a shout and flew back into the water, his right cheek and eye missing. He looked around desperately with his other eye, one hand flapping at the water, the other still holding tight to his bolter. Naaman blocked the Scout's pained grunts and snorts from his mind and swung his weapon towards the fast-approaching truck. Heavy-calibre bullets ripped through the dirt and sang over the Scout-sergeant's head. Naaman sighted on the driver through the cracked glass of the truck's windshield.

He loosed off two rounds in quick succession, the first punching through the glass to explode in the ork's chest, the second missing by the smallest margin to tear into the troop compartment behind. The ork wrestled for control of the vehicle despite the gaping hole in its ribcage, head lowered protectively.

Naaman heard a dull thud. Less than a second later a shell exploded on the stream bank behind the squad, showering the Scouts with dirt and water. He realised that Teldis had stopped making any noise, but did not break his gaze from the truck. More fire from the pintle gun sprayed along the bank and Ras ducked back with a cry.

'Emperor's hairy arse!' the Scout yelled, waggling his hand fiercely, blood

spraying from where a finger had been shot away.

'Cease your blasphemy!' snapped Naaman, firing another burst of shots, this time aiming for the gunner. The ork fell away from its weapon, head split apart by a detonation within. 'Do not speak of the Emperor in vain!'

'My apologies, sergeant,' answered Ras, taking up his firing position again, altered blood already clotting his wounded hand. 'I shall report to the Chaplains for penance when we reach our brothers.'

The ork slewed the truck to a halt a dozen metres away. The greenskin pulled a pistol from within the cab and started firing as its passengers spilled over the side. Naaman ignored the driver and directed his fire at those disembarking. Two orks were dead before they hit the ground, their bodies mangled by multiple bolt-round explosions. Four more dashed straight at the Scouts, cleavers in hand, pistols spitting bullets. A lucky hit caught Naaman across the right side of his head, smashing his comm-link and taking off the top of his ear. Out of the corner of his eye, Naaman saw the driver slump backwards, a neat hole in its forehead from a sniper round.

'Good marksmanship, Scout Kudin,' Naaman said, swapping his empty bolter magazine for a fresh one.

There was no reply. Naaman glanced to his right and saw Kudin doubled up in the stream, blood pouring from a vicious gash across the side of his neck. Gethan was using the wounded Scout's rifle.

Naaman rose up to his full height and pulled out his combat knife as the orks lunged towards the stream. A greenskin tried to vault over him, but he slashed at its groin as it went past, opening up a cut along its thigh from pelvis to knee, slicing through muscle and tendons. The greenskin floundered to one side as it landed, unable to keep its balance on the ruined leg. Naaman turned and fired a bolt-round into its face.

The battlewagon opened fire again. This time the shell exploded in the stream, shredding what was left of Teldis and ripping apart two orks as they dropped down into the water. Gethan fired past Naaman as the last greenskin splashed along the waterway, the shot taking out its throat.

There came a brief pause. The orks from the first truck were all dead, those from the other were running along the bank to close with the Scouts. The battlewagon ground forwards slowly, smoke drifting from the muzzle of its cannon as the ork gunner clumsily reloaded.

'One thing at a time,' Naaman said to nobody in particular. He reached down to his belt and pulled free a perfect sphere of dull metal. There was a rune etched

into it. The activation sigil glowed red as he rubbed his thumb across it. Pulling himself up the bank, Naaman took aim on the battlewagon, bullets zipping around him, and hurled the grenade. Upturned ork faces watched the globe arcing through the air until it sailed into the back of the battlewagon.

There was no explosion. Instead of fire and shrapnel, the stasis grenade erupted with a shimmering globe of energy, engulfing the battlewagon and everything within ten metres of it. Inside that hazy bubble, time slowed almost to a stop. Naaman could see the gunner with a hand on the breech lever of the cannon. He saw the scowling face of the driver, flecks of saliva flying from between its fangs. Bullets fired by the two pintle gunners on the gantry hung in the air, moving so slowly they had appeared to have stopped. Orks were frozen in mid-leap as they bundled out of the troop compartment, flecks of rust and sprays of dirt colouring the air around them.

He had only bought a little more time. The stasis field was already weakening, the sphere of energy slowly but perceptibly shrinking. Naaman felt Gethan come up beside him as the sergeant took aim at the mob of orks running towards them.

'It's just us, sergeant,' whispered Gethan.

'No it isn't,' Naaman replied, firing a volley into the orks, cutting the legs from beneath a greenskin.

The rumble of engines Naaman had first heard a few seconds earlier became a roar of throttles as the Ravenwing bikes leapt across the stream just behind the sergeant. Their bolters chattering, Aquila's squadron drove straight at the orks, ripping a swathe through the unruly mob. Return fire rang from their armour and their bikes as they ploughed into the midst of the enemy, chainswords in hand, hacking and slashing.

With an audible pop of air pressure, the stasis field imploded. Bullets fired almost half a minute earlier suddenly screamed over Naaman's head. The throb of an engine being gunned brought Naaman's attention back to the functioning truck; gunner and passengers dead, the driver accelerated straight at the sergeant.

'Down!' he rasped, hurling himself into the stream, one hand dragging Gethan with him.

The truck hurtled over the bank and tilted to one side, front wheel catching on a rock, sending the whole machine cart-wheeling over Naaman and Gethan. It crashed in a plume of water and smoke, the driver hurled through the remnants of the windshield in a shower of glass shards. Amazingly, the ork was still alive. It dragged itself through the mud in Naaman's direction, pistol clicking empty in its grip.

‘Kill it!’ Naaman told Gethan. The Scout raised the sniper rifle and put a crystal-tipped round through the wounded ork’s left eye. It shuddered for a few seconds as the sniper bullet shattered on the inside of its skull, releasing toxins through the alien’s bloodstream.

The distinctive *crump* of the battlewagon cannon echoed along the stream. A moment later, a shell exploded in the middle of Aquila’s squadron. Naaman saw two bikes and their riders flung high into the air, armour plates spinning, engine parts flying in all directions. The twisted remains of Space Marines and machines crashed to the ground trailing smoke as debris rained down into the burning grass.

‘Time to move on,’ Naaman said, pushing Gethan onto the bank. Scrambling up afterwards, Naaman saw the two pintle gunners on the battlewagon sighting in their direction. Even as a warning left Naaman’s lips, Gethan was shredded by the hail of bullets, holes punched through his armour and body.

The Scout fell backwards, red froth bubbling from his lips. Naaman spared a second to see if there was any chance of saving the Scout. There was none. Had Gethan received some of the later implants, his wounds might not have been fatal, but he was simply too young, his body too normal, to survive such punishment. Naaman put a bolter round into the youth’s skull to spare him any more pain and rounded on the orks with a fierce cry.

‘Death to the xenos!’

Though his body was filled with the fire of fury, Naaman directed his rage, siphoned it from a wild, uncontrollable flame into a white-hot focus. The orks that had spilled from the back of the battlewagon became the object of his wrath as he advanced with bolter levelled, every burst of fire hitting its mark, every salvo of rounds ending the life of an enemy.

Aquila and the surviving member of his squadron circled around the battlewagon, raking it with fire, but its armour was too thick for the explosive bolts to penetrate. Hunkered in its turret, the gunner was almost impossible to hit as the cannon fired again, this time missing the speeding Ravenwing by a considerable distance.

Aquila’s course brought him swinging around the battlewagon and up to Naaman from behind. The sergeant throttled down and came to a stop beside Naaman, and addressed him through his external speakers.

‘Head for Koth Ridge, brother,’ said Aquila. ‘I have sent warning to Master Belial, but what you have seen is far more valuable than my report.’

‘You have nothing to take on that battlewagon, brother,’ replied Naaman. ‘You

should withdraw while you can. My life is not worth the sacrifice of yours.'

'It is, Brother Naaman,' said Aquila. He slapped a fist to his chest in salute. 'Not just for what your head contains, but also for what is in your heart. You make the Tenth Company proud, Naaman. *Exulta nominus Imperialis*. I can think of no other to serve as the best example to those who would be the battle-brothers of the future.'

Before Naaman could reply, Aquila opened up the throttle and sped away, the Scout-sergeant's parting words lost in the bike's roar. The two riders lanced through the ork mob with mounted bolters and flashing chainswords. In the thick of the fighting, Aquila's companion was wrenched from his bike when his chainblade caught in an ork's chest. Surrounded by greenskins, he battled on, cutting down two more foes; his defiance was cut short by another shell from the battlewagon, which tore apart the Dark Angel and orks without distinction.

All that remained was Naaman, Aquila and the battlewagon. The Ravenwing sergeant lifted his chainsword to the charge position and drove straight at the flank of the armoured vehicle. The prow of his bike smashed into the battlewagon's right track, shredding links and buckling wheels. The impact hurled Aquila forwards, the sergeant bouncing against the slab side of the armoured transport; as he tumbled Aquila grabbed the top of the troop compartment. The bike exploded as Aquila dragged himself over the side of the truck. Flames crackled from the battlewagon's engine as ruptured fuel lines sprayed their contents across the grass. Through the smoke and fire, Naaman saw the black-armoured figure smash his way through the back of the driver's cab. A moment later, a severed ork head sailed from the window and bounced through the burning grass.

'For the Lion!' Naaman shouted, believing that Aquila would make it out alive. All he had to do was kill the gunner.

With a blast that hurled Naaman to his back and sent debris hundreds of metres into the air, the battlewagon exploded. Track links and pieces of engine showered down on the flattened grass and fell into the burning crater where the battlewagon had been. As ragged shards of metal continued to thud into the dirt around him, Naaman headed into the devastation to look for Aquila. There was a slim chance that the sergeant had avoided the worst of the detonation and his power armour had protected him.

He found a black-armoured leg, sheared bone jutting from the cracked and stained ceramite. After that Naaman gave up. He didn't want to find anything else.

Returning to the stream, Naaman piled the bodies of his dead Scouts under the lip of the bank and covered them roughly with branches and ripped-up clods of earth and grass, hoping that the orks would not find and mutilate the corpses. When the Dark Angels had destroyed the orks, Naaman would come back and ensure the remains were returned to the Chapter for the proper funeral rites.

He took one of the sniper rifles and refilled his ammunition pouches. Buggies with searchlights and the headlamps of half-tracks were panning left and right in the distance, scouring the pre-dawn gloom. The fight had obviously attracted attention from the orks. He had to get moving.

Veteran Sergeant Naaman once more broke into a loping run, heading for Koth Ridge.

# THE TALE OF NESTOR

## HOLD THE LINE

The crest of Koth Ridge was a mess of activity. Like ants building a nest, hundreds of Piscina troopers were using spades and trenching tools to dig what defences they could. Empty ammunition crates were filled with the dirt from these foxholes and used to make barricades, while clearing teams worked further down the eastward slope, using saw and flamer to hack and burn away the cover provided by scattered trees and thick mats of waist-high thorny bushes. Other squads laboured at digging up the boulders that dotted the hillside, but only the smallest could be moved and rolled up the slope to improve the defences.

Amongst the grey-and-green fatigues of the defence troopers stood the green-armoured figures of the Dark Angels, both directing the labour and keeping watch for the approaching orks. Apothecary Nestor walked through the throng, his white armour standing out amongst his brethren. He was looking for the field commander, Sarpedon. Nestor spied the Interrogator-Chaplain's black armour and bone-coloured robe amongst a squad of Devastators standing guard from a sandbagged position to the north.

The troopers stayed clear of Nestor's path as he strode along the line. A few bobbed their heads and touched a finger to the peaks of their caps in deference; most turned away and busied themselves with their work. Nestor could sense their fear even though they tried to keep their nervous expressions hidden. The tang of the sweaty air was tinged with adrenaline. The back-breaking work was as much to keep their minds occupied as it was to erect a defensive line against the orks. Anticipation – foreboding – was just as much a threat to the Koth Ridge defenders as ork guns and knives.

Sarpedon finished his conversation with the Devastators as Nestor approached. The Interrogator-Chaplain walked away from the squad as the Apothecary

waited respectfully for his superior to join him.

'Brother-Chaplain, I wish to speak with you,' Nestor called out when Sarpedon was a few paces away. The Chaplain's skull-faced helm was hung from his belt, revealing Sarpedon's square-jawed face, his broad cheeks each etched with a scar in the shape of the Dark Angels' winged sword symbol.

'Brother Nestor, how can I be of assistance?' asked the Chaplain, stopping in front of Nestor.

'I am concerned by the lack of medical supplies possessed by the Free Militia,' said the Apothecary. 'It seems that they have brought only the most basic medikits from Kadillus Harbour. Could you request that Master Belial sends more of the Apothecarion's supplies from the city?'

'Do you have sufficient supplies and equipment to attend to our battle-brothers?' asked Sarpedon, his expression impassive.

'I foresee no shortages if the estimates concerning the coming engagement are correct,' replied Nestor. 'You have told me that we should not suffer any significant casualties. Is that estimate to be revised?'

'Negative, Brother-Apothecary. Master Belial has passed on the report of Ravenwing Sergeant Aquila, which estimates enemy numbers to be in the low hundreds. We have good fields of fire, an elevated position and our defensive posture is highly advantageous. There are no reports of heavy enemy vehicles or war machines, and little if any support weapons or artillery. We dominate the field. Additional forces are en route to our position from Kadillus Harbour.'

Nestor glanced west towards the city and then looked east where dust clouds and smoke could be seen at the foot of the ridge. Dawn was slowly spreading across the plain, revealing the vehicles and mobs of the orks a few kilometres away.

'It is unlikely that reinforcements will arrive before the orks, Brother-Apothecary,' said Sarpedon, guessing Nestor's thoughts. 'Master Belial is extricating such squads as are available from the fighting in the docks. Withdrawing troops from such a position is time-consuming if they are to arrive here intact. It is imperative that the orks do not gain any foothold on Koth Ridge. If they do so, they will be able to attack our reinforcements as they arrive.'

'I will keep the brothers fighting whatever the orks bring against us, brother,' said Nestor. 'While a Dark Angel still breathes, no ork will set foot on this ridge. I am still concerned for the wellbeing of our allies. Casualties amongst the defence troopers will be much higher. We are relying upon their continued survival to add weight to our position. I believe that we should provide their

medical officers with whatever assistance we can to ensure that happens.'

'The Piscina force is suffering heavily in the city; we cannot divert supplies from that battlezone. It would be self-defeating to shore up the defence here only by allowing the orks to break free of the city. The Piscina officers will have to do what they can with the resources at hand, Brother Nestor.'

'I understand,' said the Apothecary. 'Where do you wish me to take my place in the defence?'

Sarpedon's grey eyes scanned up and down the ridge. A thin smile twisted his lips as his gaze fell upon Squad Vigilus at the heart of the defensive line. The Terminators from the Deathwing Company wore huge suits of bone-white multilayered armour, capable of shrugging off fire from anti-tank weapons and heavy artillery.

'I think that Sergeant Scalprum and his Devastators would benefit the most from your presence,' said the Chaplain.

Nestor nodded in agreement. It was unlikely the Deathwing would require Nestor's attention given the apparent lack of heavy weapons possessed by the orks.

'The blessing of the Lion upon you,' said Sarpedon, patting a hand on Nestor's shoulder pad.

'May you stand tall in his eternal gaze, Brother-Chaplain,' Nestor replied.

The two parted and Nestor continued towards Sergeant Scalprum. The Devastators' leader had split his warriors between two crate-lined emplacements, one covering the broken-down ruins of an old hunting lodge half a kilometre down the slope, the other with a wide arc of fire overlooking the approach to the line of troopers to the south. Each combat squad of five Space Marines included a heavy bolter and a plasma cannon, the first for cutting through the massed ork infantry, the second for destroying their light vehicles.

'Hail, Brother-Apothecary,' Scalprum greeted Nestor. 'I think you will be using your bolt pistol more than your narthecium in this battle.'

'I share your confidence, brother-sergeant,' replied Nestor. Flexing his left fingers, Nestor activated the narthecium gauntlet, a whirring bonesaw spinning into life beneath his fist. 'Of course, the narthecium can be used to wound as well as heal, brother. I am glad that Master Belial saw fit to despatch me to your side with such speed.'

Scalprum laughed.

'It did give me a moment's pause for thought when I saw that Thunderhawk landing and only you walking down the ramp,' said the sergeant. 'I wondered if

perhaps there was something Master Belial was not telling us!'

'Rest assured that my hasty entrance was only made possible because I had been tending to our wounded behind the front line in the city. Those who are more involved are proving difficult to extricate without unnecessary risk.'

'I heard the same from Brother Sarpedon,' said Scalprum. 'With the strength of the Lion to protect us, I think that our battle-brothers will arrive to find the battle already won.'

'Let us hope that is the case,' replied Nestor. 'Has there been any update from Sergeant Aquila?'

Scalprum's armour whined as he shook his head.

'No, there has been nothing more from Aquila since we received his last transmission early this morning,' said the sergeant. 'There was some sporadic fighting about two hours ago, at the foot of the ridge. If we had not sent the Rhinos back to Kadillus to pick up the reinforcements, we might have intervened. As it was, there was nothing we could do from here. Though I hope I am wrong, I believe our brothers in the Ravenwing and Tenth Company have made the ultimate sacrifice bringing us warning of the ork advance.'

Nestor looked out across the brightening slope and wondered what had become of Aquila and the others. Two of the Ravenwing squadron had not yet had their progenoid glands removed for the Chapter stores. Containing the gene-seed of the Dark Angels, these implants were vital to the creation of future generations of Astartes.

'When we have pushed back the greenskins, we will conduct a search and ensure the bodies of our fallen brethren are attended to by the proper rites,' said the Apothecary.

The thought brought something else to Nestor's mind and he turned back to Scalprum. He opened the data panel in the side of the bulky narthecium enclosing his left forearm and hand. Tapping in a sequence of digits, he brought up a list of names.

'If my records are correct, Brothers Anduriel, Mephael, Saboath and Zarael still have progenoid glands intact,' said the Apothecary.

'That is correct,' replied Scalprum. He stabbed a finger to three of the Devastators in the emplacement with them. 'Mephael, Saboath and Zarael are here, you'll find Anduriel in the other combat squad.'

'I am sure they will continue to guard the Chapter's due for some time to come, until we may relieve them of their burden in more peaceful circumstances,' said Nestor, retracting the blade of the narthecium. 'Your squad was involved in the

fighting in Kadillus Harbour. Is there anything else I should be aware of?'

Scalprum looked at his squad, one hand resting on the holstered bolt pistol at his waist.

'There is nothing acute that needs tending to. Saboath has a crack in his left femur, Hasmal has a laceration to his right side and Anahel has a torn preomnor that has been causing him some discomfort.'

Nestor nodded as he committed these facts to his memory. As rugged as Space Marine physiology was, the intrusive treatments and surgery of battlefield medicine were always a short-term measure. Being unaware of an existing injury or condition greatly increased the risks of any intervention. Sometimes it came down to preserving the life of a battle-brother for a few hours whilst knowing that the treatment itself would kill him later. Such were the hard lessons of the Apothecarion, and Nestor's tutor, Brother Mennion, had talked at length regarding the difficult decisions every Apothecary would face.

It was these minutes and hours before battle that always tested Nestor's resolve, more than the blood and shouts of the wounded. When battle was in motion, training and experience ensured that Nestor acted without hesitation, and could make such harsh decisions without a moment's remorse or reflection. In the cold, quiet time before and after battle, it was far harder to be so dispassionate.

Nestor excused himself from the Devastators and found a patch of shade behind a jutting pillar of rock. He looked south, where the Koth Ridge dropped dramatically down to end in cliffs, beneath which the Piscina Ocean crashed against jagged rocks. Further out, the sheet of blue seemed still, untouched by the conflict that had engulfed this small upthrust of land.

He took a deep breath and absorbed the calm radiating from the sea. He pushed away the bleak thoughts of what injuries might befall the brothers behind him – painful fates that he knew with microscopic precision – and quietly recited the Litanies of Diagnosis, Salvation and Mercy.

While he strengthened his will with these words, part of Nestor detected the approaching growl of engines and the stronger presence of hydrocarbons carried on the wind from the east. The comm chimed in his ear and Sarpedon's calm tones cut through Nestor's recital of the Prayers of Battle.

'Enemy in sight. Zero-three-fifty. Devastator range in one minute. Our faith is our shield.'

Nestor unholstered his bolt pistol and headed back to his place in the line.

His autosenses darkening to filter out the bright morning sun, Nestor watched the Devastators performing their duty. The ork army was approaching in two

waves: a swift-moving body of vehicles followed some distance behind by their infantry.

Nestor could see that the greenskin approach was fatally flawed. Carried away by their enthusiasm for battle, the bike riders and buggy crews raced ahead of the main force. It was probable that the ork commander wished to use the faster elements of the force to occupy the Koth Ridge defenders while the foot-slogging ork warriors moved up the slope. In theory that was not such a bad decision, but Nestor could tell at a glance that the plan would not work; the ork light vehicles were not numerous enough nor carried enough firepower to face the Space Marines and Free Militia force on their own.

Though dozens of ork vehicles streamed up the slope leaving plumes of smoke and dust in their wake, the defenders had every advantage of position and elevation. The lascannons of the Free Militia opened fire first, streaks of blue energy lancing down the ridge at the oncoming vehicles. The firing was premature and somewhat inaccurate but several half-tracked bikes were turned into smouldering piles of slag by the blasts. The *brak-brak-brak* of autocannons joined the rip of laser energy splitting the air. Grass and mud and stone and metal and flesh were sent flying along the slope in almost equal measure as the guns stitched their mark across the rock-strewn ridge.

With a deep thrumming, Brother Saboath charged up his plasma cannon. Coils glowed bluish-white with the build-up of energy and sparks danced from the vented muzzle of his weapon. Without haste, he altered his aim a little to the right. Nestor followed the muzzle of the gun and saw a squadron of war buggies racing recklessly up the slope, bouncing across rocks and narrow fissures.

With an explosive wave of compressing air, Saboath fired. A miniature star erupted from the plasma cannon, casting harsh shadows as it flew down the slope to crash into the foremost buggy. The vehicle's engine block disintegrated in a shower of molten metal and super-heated fuel, the vapour of which ignited, engulfing the vehicle in a sheet of blue fire, incinerating the driver and gunner, melting the tyres and warping the chassis. The wreck smashed to pieces on a boulder, hurling burning oil and red-hot bolts across the thin grass. Patches of smoking plastic and cooling metal dotted the mud and rocks amongst the spreading patches of fire.

'Good hit, brother,' said Nestor.

'The first shot is always the easiest,' replied Saboath.

Another ball of ravening energy seared down the slope from the other combat squad, punching clean through the side of another buggy to erupt from the other

side in a spray of molten steel and liquefied flesh. The whine of the plasma cannons' generators grew in pitch as the weapons recharged.

'Mark target at fifty-three-five, seven hundred metres,' announced Sergeant Scalprum. Nestor realised the Devastator sergeant was using the broad-address frequency, talking to the Free Militia as well as the Dark Angels.

He looked in the direction described by Scalprum and saw a few dozen smaller greenskin slaves – the gretchin – manoeuvring crude artillery pieces into position behind a cluster of low rocks. Two of the war machines were large-bore cannons mounted on wheeled platforms. Another appeared to be some kind of engine-powered catapult. There were two other war machines: large rail-mounted missiles, each twice the size of a Space Marine. The gretchin crews, whipped into action by burly ork overseers in heavy masks, jostled and struggled to point their artillery up the slope.

Nestor heard the multiple pops of mortars firing from the sandbagged enclaves behind him, in response to Scalprum's instructions. Craning his neck, he followed the blur of the bombs sailing into the overcast sky and watched them fall on the ork war machine position. Half the bombardment fell short, exploding harmlessly against the rocks, but four or five bombs landed in and around the big guns, shredding the crews with shrapnel, dismounting one of the crude rockets.

All along the ridge to the left and right, the Dark Angels and Free Militia poured fire into the attacking orks. Smoking wrecks and charred green corpses littered the slope, where fires were growing in strength, crawling up the ridge towards the defenders, hurried on by the prevailing wind. The smoke was as much a hindrance to the orks as the defence troops as bikes crashed onto unseen rocks and buggies tipped into hidden gorges; the Devastators had no problems seeing their targets, the thermal vision of their autosenses cutting through the thickening bank of smoke as easily as their plasma cannons cut through the armour of the ork vehicles.

To the north, Nestor's left, the crack of ork guns intensified. Half a dozen buggies raced along the ridge parallel to the defenders' line, machine guns and cannons ripping into sandbags and punching holes into the dirt-filled crates and boxes protecting the defence force. Here and there an incautious trooper fell back bloodied, but for the most part the soldiers kept their heads down and the furious fusillade passed over them or was stopped by the makeshift barricades.

A strange whistle cut through the hammer and clamour of fighting, attracting Nestor's attention. Corkscrewing wildly, the remaining ork rocket flew up through the cloud trailing flames and sparks. The defence troopers turned tripod-

mounted heavy stubbers to the sky, tracer bullets leaping up to meet the arcing missile. This fire missed its mark and the rocket completed its rising course and dipped sharply towards the ridgeline.

The steady roar of heavy bolters erupted close to Nestor as the Devastators opened up on a squadron of bikes that had come within range. The Apothecary ignored the ork vehicles racing closer to the Devastators' position and kept fixed on the trajectory of the missile. Beneath it, troopers hurled themselves to the ground, throwing themselves into foxholes and slit trenches.

The rocket landed behind the front line of defenders, crashing to the rocks in the middle of a mortar battery. The impact threw up a huge plume of mud and rock shards but there was no explosion. At first Nestor thought the warhead had failed to detonate, but as shaken men popped up their heads, looking around in disbelief, the ground began to vibrate. A pulse of green energy erupted from the crater where the rocket had landed, rippling through the air and ground.

Where the green wave touched something, it tossed the man or object into the air, shaking apart guns and hurling troopers tens of metres into the sky, bones snapping, limbs contorting unnaturally. Nestor could feel the weak edges of the vibration through his feet and the particles of dirt on the crate barricade danced with the reverberations. The pulse disappeared and the unfortunate troops that had been picked up dropped to the ground like stones, their falls breaking necks, cracking open skulls and crushing organs.

Nestor could see a dozen soldiers not moving, twice that number rolling around or trying to crawl to safety. Secondary detonations from the cache of bombs popped inside the mortar pit, scattering metal fragments through the survivors.

A glance to his right confirmed to Nestor that the Devastators' position was still secure: the tangled wreckage of five bikes smoked and sparked further down the slope, the closest at least three hundred metres away. He was about to set off towards the injured troopers to see if he could assist when the rocket pulsed again. The shockwave was slower this time but more violent; the ground rippled like a pool when a stone has been tossed into it. Dirt and rocks exploded in a growing circle, hurling more troopers from their feet; the barricades they had laboured so hard to erect were cast down by the pulse, shallow trenches collapsing, burying those inside with stones and dirt.

Into this devastation roared buggies and warbikes, guns blazing. Nestor saw a young officer pull himself to his feet, straighten his cap and then collapse again as a hail of bullets ripped into his chest and gut. The handful of mortar crew that had luckily survived the rocket impact dragged themselves across the ground,

bullets tearing trails around them. A youthful trooper leapt bravely over a wall of sandbags, a grenade in hand. His face disappeared into a bloody mush and the primed grenade flew from his fingers, exploding amongst his squad mates.

Their drivers cackling, buggies veered and swerved through the emplacements, bouncing over the dead and wounded, crunching bones beneath their wheels, guns hammering a staccato beat of death. A small ork half-track roared through the chaos, a fuel tank trailer bouncing madly behind it. Flames licked from its barrel-shaped turret, indiscriminately setting fire to ammunition stores and troopers. Burning men flailed through their fellow troopers, spreading the panic.

Nestor set off at a run, bolt pistol ready. Behind him he heard Scalprum barking orders at the split combat squad, directing their fire along the ridgeline. Just ahead of the Apothecary, Sergeant Vigilus and his Terminators advanced through the breach in the line, storm bolters roaring, the flickering of rounds blurred against the dancing flames. Reinforcements poured in from further up the line, great-coated officers bellowing at their men to take up the empty positions. Having wreaked considerable carnage, the ork vehicles screeched away back down the slope, evading the vengeance of the Dark Angels and Piscina troopers arriving at the break in the defences.

Nestor arrived as the Deathwing took up a firing position within one of the half-ruined emplacements. The Apothecary saw nothing but charred bodies within and moved on, heading for the mortar pit. A choking sob to his right drew Nestor's attention and he slowed to search through mangled bodies sprawled between the rocks and boxes. A trooper surged from a pile of corpses, one leg trailing uselessly after him, his face masked with drying blood.

'Help me,' he begged, falling down just in front of Nestor.

'What is your name, trooper?'

The Apothecary rolled the Free Militiaman to his back, ignoring his cries of pain. His left thigh was a gory mess, broken bone jutting through the flesh. As Nestor's fingers twitched at the controls of the narthecium, a scalpel blade snicked from his index finger. Holding the struggling man down with his other hand, Nestor sliced open the wound on the trooper's inner leg. Magnifying his autosenses, the Apothecary examined the blood flow and concluded that the soldier's femoral artery was intact. He was suffering from an oblique fracture in the distal zone of his femur. He could be saved.

'Your name?' Nestor asked again.

'Lemmit, sir,' the man said between haggard gasps.

'Do not be afraid, Trooper Lemmit,' Nestor said calmly. 'What I am about to do

will hurt a lot, but it will save your leg. Do you understand?'

Lemmit nodded, eyes wide with fear.

None of the painkillers in the narthecium could be used; they would put any non-Astartes into a coma if they didn't kill Lemmit outright. With his free hand, Nestor ripped Lemmit's belt from his waist and thrust it between the trooper's teeth.

'Bite on this if you need to,' said Nestor.

The Apothecary fixed the bone first, pulling apart the fracture and resetting it while Lemmit howled in agony. Nestor cut the audio-feed on his helmet to blank out the distraction. Selecting the medical riveter, he worked the narthecium along the broken bone, fixing the two pieces in place. It only took a few seconds, but when Nestor glanced at Lemmit he saw the man had passed out. As with the painkillers, the stimulants in Nestor's possession were too strong for a normal human.

Quickly checking that Lemmit's breathing and pulse were still within tolerable limits, Nestor decided to let him stay unconscious. Using a quick-sealing resin, the Apothecary bonded the riveted pieces of thigh bone. Switching attachments, he sprayed a fine mist of biological adhesive on the wound and pulled together the sides of the incision he had made, holding them together for a few more seconds until the adhesive had dried. Retracting the adhesive dispenser, he made double-sure by stitching along the wound with the auto-suture.

Checking that the man had no other acute surface injuries or internal damage, Nestor picked up Lemmit and carried him to a wall of dirt-filled boxes and leant him against the crates, propping up the damaged leg with a rock.

'Wake him up and give him some water,' the Apothecary instructed a passing sergeant, who accepted the Space Marine's order without question and knelt beside Lemmit, uncapping his canteen.

Nestor moved on, the experience of the procedure filed away in his memory for future reference. He came across a badly burned trooper who stared at the Apothecary with one eye from a blackened, twisted face. Lowering to one knee, Nestor could see that the man's chest was burnt through to the sternum and showed the line of ribs down his left-hand side. Subdermal burns extended over a third of his torso, a purplish fluid leaking from the open wounds. Death was a certainty. He placed his left hand across the trooper's face, obscuring his view. With his right hand, Nestor pulled his combat knife from his belt and punched it quickly but smoothly through the exposed ribs, puncturing the heart. The unfortunate trooper trembled for a moment and fell still.

The Apothecary wiped his knife clean on the man's tunic and sheathed it. He stood up and looked around for someone else needing his aid. He saw a cluster of men gathered around another lying on the ground, one of them thumping the trooper's chest to get his heart started. Nestor took a step towards this group when the comm chime sounded.

'Brother Nestor, infantry assault imminent. Return to combat position,' instructed Brother Sarpedon.

'Confirm, Brother-Chaplain,' replied Nestor. He gave the dead and the wounded one last look and turned away, heading back to the Devastators.

As he strode along the ridge, he could see that the orks had paid heavily for their tactical naiveté. Dozens of vehicles smoked along the ridgeside, the bodies of those orks that had tried to escape lying next to their wrecked bikes and buggies. Other than the breakthrough at the site of the rocket strike, the orks had not managed to get closer than a couple of hundred metres from the defence line.

Now the mass of the orks poured forwards, hundreds if not thousands of green-skinned warriors hurrying up the slope as their cannons boomed behind and the catapult launched bombs that exploded in the air above the defenders, raining down red-hot metal shards.

Something clanged from Nestor's shoulder just before he reached Squad Scalprum. He glanced to his left and saw the white paint on his pad scraped away, revealing the grey ceramite beneath. Something hissed at his feet. He bent down and picked it up, examining the fragment between thumb and forefinger. It appeared to be a piece of bolt, the thread melted, head warped by the explosion that had thrown it against the Apothecary.

Nestor tossed the piece of shrapnel away. If that was the worst threat the orks had to offer, it would only be the lightly armoured troopers that would need his attention.

As the orks died in their hundreds, Nestor did not think of it as a massacre. It was simply a cleansing, as one might purge a wound of infection. The Free Militia and Dark Angels purged Koth Ridge of the ork infection with lascannon and autocannon, mortar and heavy bolter, plasma cannon and heavy stubber. The Apothecary had not even fired his weapon yet: no ork had survived to come within range.

'This is Interrogator-Chaplain Sarpedon to all defence forces. Those without eye protection should avert their gaze from the east. Incoming bombardment from orbit. I repeat, incoming orbital bombardment includes plasma attack. Do

not look at the attack site with unprotected eyes. Attack to commence in one hundred and eighty seconds.'

'This should be worth seeing,' said Scalprum.

Nestor nodded and increased his autosense visual filtration to maximum. Koth Ridge darkened in his eyes, the swarm of aliens clambering over gulleys and running through clusters of rocks becoming a darker shadow in the gloom.

'This is Brother Sarpedon,' the Chaplain said over the Dark Angels' ciphered comm channel. 'The *Unrelenting Fury* is cleared for a short pass only. Orks are still in control of the defence laser site at Kadillus Harbour. If the bombardment does not break the ork attack, we cannot expect further orbital support. Ready your weapons and your souls and believe in the purity of our cause.'

'Confirm, Brother-Chaplain,' Nestor heard Sergeant Vigilus reply. 'Any further information on the arrival of reinforcements from the city?'

'Transports and armoured vehicles have left Kadillus Harbour. Time of relief estimated at four hours. Expect to hold until dusk.'

'Understood, Brother-Chaplain,' said Vigilus. 'We shall be the shield of Kadillus.'

Nestor looked up into the grey sky. Even without the cloud, he would have been able to see nothing of the Dark Angels battle-barge manoeuvring into firing position hundreds of kilometres above. The *Unrelenting Fury* would be dipping down towards Piscina's atmosphere, rotating about its axis to bring the dorsal bombardment cannons to the correct angle. Shells the size of buildings were being loaded into massive breeches – much of the size and weight was ablative shielding that would melt away during entry into the planet's atmosphere – while armoured turrets like small city blocks turned slowly into position.

The first salvo appeared as two blurs barely visible through Nestor's darkened autosenses. They streaked groundwards, punching out of the cloud at ultrasonic speed. The warheads had been set to airburst, exploding five hundred metres above the orks, two kilometres from the defenders of Koth Ridge. Two stars burst into life against the darkened vista. Even through the filter of his autosenses the blossoms of plasma were bright enough to make Nestor's surgically improved eyes water. The explosions scorched the sky, raining down fire, a shockwave advancing ahead of a sheet of flame, obliterating everything in its path. Molten destruction rained down on the orks, consuming a swathe of the advancing greenskins in a bright conflagration. Nestor heard the strangely high-pitched shrieks of the orks; the cries of blinded troopers too stupid to have heeded Sarpedon's warning; an ear-splitting crack of air and water molecules

being ripped apart.

An area half a kilometre across was devastated in three seconds, shattered rocks turned to glass, orks reduced to a haze of ash and dust, patches of grass and stands of bushes no more. Two overlapping smooth-sided craters were all that remained of the hundreds of orks that had been beneath the twin detonations.

Rocked by the suddenness of the attack, the ork advance stopped in its tracks. There were fearful shouts, while a few of the greenskins fired their guns vainly at the clouds, yelling defiance. Some of the orks were evidently clever enough to realise the bombardment could not strike too close to the ridgeline without hitting the defenders. This orkish wisdom spread through the lines and the army broke into a charge, striking up the slope in their hundreds. Ranting and panting, the orks closed on the Dark Angels and the Piscina troopers, but it was not to their benefit. Although safe from death from above, the orks now plunged into range of the bolters and lasguns of the Koth Ridge defenders.

A storm of red las-beams streaked down the hillside while bolters and storm bolters coughed death at the oncoming wave of greenskins. As the most headstrong orks were cut down by the volleys of fire, two more shells plunged down from orbit, this time set for a ground burst. The whole of Koth Ridge jolted underfoot as the pair of shells exploded inside the rock of the slope. Thousands of tons of debris erupted into the air with all the violence of one of Kadillus's many volcanoes. Bloodied and battered ork bodies fell like rain. A long stretch of the slope sheared away and tumbled down into the East Barrens as a massive landslide of rocks and corpses.

A beam as blindingly bright as the plasma detonations lanced into the sky from many kilometres behind Nestor. The power of the shot boiled a hole through the clouds and a few seconds later there came a sharp rumbling like a compressed crack of thunder.

The orks had worked out how to fire the defence laser.

'Did they hit?' barked Nestor.

The comm stayed silent for several seconds, during which the Apothecary and the other Dark Angels nearby looked at each other.

'Negative,' replied Sarpedon. 'Close miss. The shields took the brunt of the residual radiation. Master Belial is withdrawing the *Unrelenting Fury*. He does not wish to gamble on the orks improving their aim. It is just us now. Give the enemy no respite! Pour our wrath upon this foul horde and remember that we defend one of the Emperor's worlds!'

The chaos and confusion of close battle engulfed Koth Ridge. To the north, Piscina troopers unleashed disciplined volleys of lasgun fire into the charging orks while their heavy weapons continued to pound away with las-bolt and shell and bomb. Scalprum's Devastators added their bolter fire to that of the plasma cannons and heavy bolters, reaping a harvest of death through the packed mobs of the greenskins. With bullets whipping past over the barricade, Nestor added his own fire to the fusillade, picking off those few orks that managed to struggle through the storm of plasma blasts and bolts.

Despite the heavy casualties, the greenskins pushed up the slope into the teeth of the onslaught, using what patches of cover remained to close with their enemies. Barely a hundred metres from the Free Militia were the clustered remains of a building compound, abandoned for centuries, partly swallowed up by grass and bushes. Within the tumbled walls and half-destroyed outhouses, several dozen orks found shelter. They fired over the tumbled-down bricks at the Piscina troopers with little accuracy but a considerable weight of fire. As soldiers were forced behind their barricades, more orks streamed forwards into the lessened fire, scrambling up the steep slope to take cover behind rocks and in gulleys and hollows.

Nestor heard Sarpedon barking orders over the comm, demanding that the Free Militia draw more troops into the fight from further north to ensure the line held. While ork rockets and bombs fell amongst them, the troopers were reluctant to leave their slit trenches and emplacements. Exasperated, Sarpedon ran from the Dark Angels' position, his robes fluttering behind him, a glowing power sword in his hand.

'Squad Vigilus, Brother Acutus, with me!' bellowed the Interrogator-Chaplain. 'Into the enemy! Drive them back!'

The Deathwing Terminators of Squad Vigilus stomped down the slope, storm-bolter fire exploding across the rocks and walls protecting the orks. From the midst of the squad emerged Brother-Lexicanium Acutus, wearing the distinctive blue robes of the Librarium. In one hand he carried an ornate carved staff, topped with a marble carving shaped as the winged sword of the Chapter. With the Terminators gathered close to shield him against the bullets and blasts of energy flying from the guns of the orks, Acutus raised the staff above his head, grasping it in both hands. Psychic energy flared along the length of the staff, crackling from crystal symbols embedded into the haft. Dirt and stones circled the Librarian in a psychic gale. Sparks erupted from the ornate structure of crystalline wires around his head.

Acutus swept the staff down in front of him. A short distance in front of the Terminators, molecules tore apart with a shrill screech. The Librarian cleaved a rent in the fabric of reality, opening up a gash between the material and immaterial. Colours and sounds swirled from the breach, scintillating and blinding. Following the Librarian, the Deathwing stepped into the vortex and disappeared.

A few seconds later, Nestor glimpsed a second tear appear beside the walls of the ruined compound. The Deathwing advanced out of the void, the flare of storm bolters lighting the inside of the moss-covered walls. Brother Amediel let loose the fury of his heavy flamer, a burst of white fire roaring through the ruins, exploding from shattered doors and windows, roasting alive everything inside.

The orks poured from their hiding holes, some with patches of flamer fuel still burning their flesh, clubbing and chopping at the Terminators. The Deathwing attacked back with glowing power fists and whirring chainfists, smashing bone, pulping organs and slashing through flesh. Acutus emerged from his warp-walk, staff tipped by a glowing scythe of psychic energy. A wide arcing blow sliced the heads from three orks; another cut the legs from beneath two more.

The orks had seen enough and fled the ruins, the bolts of the Deathwing roaring after them. Nestor had no time to see what happened next as a warning shout from Scalprum heralded another ork push against the Devastators.

The renewed attack began with the explosion of several shells around Nestor. Crates exploded into splinters that skittered from the Space Marines' armour, scratching the paint of their dark green livery but doing little else. Spreading out to limit casualties from the devastating blasts of the plasma cannons, the orks snarled and yelled as they pounded up the slope, trusting to speed rather than cover.

'Two reloads remaining,' reported Brother Hasmal as he slammed another magazine into his heavy bolter.

Beside Nestor, a plasma cannon blazed again, the blast erupting amongst the orks, charring flesh and burning bone. Still the orks came on, and past the green wave Nestor could see a bulkier shape advancing – some kind of walker twice the height of the orks, with claw-handed arms and heavy guns.

'Enemy Dreadnought,' warned Nestor.

'I see it,' replied Scalprum.

The orks were less than fifty metres away, many of them passing into a dip in the ground that hid them from view.

'Prepare for close quarters combat,' said Scalprum, lifting up his power fist. A

shimmering blue field wreathed the heavy gauntlet, crackling along reinforced knuckles.

Nestor refreshed the magazine in his bolt pistol and slipped out the bone saw from his narthecium. There was a final hail of bolts as the orks rushed across the last few dozen metres of open ground, but it was not enough to stop their momentum.

The Apothecary stayed behind the barricade and picked off orks with his bolt pistol as they came charging straight at the squad, fanged mouths baying for blood, red eyes wild with alien ferocity. He fired into the face of an ork just a few metres away, the bolt shattering the creature's skull. The Apothecary had time for one more shot – through the gut of another foe – before the orks were at the barricade, firing their pistols at point-blank range and swinging with their cleavers and mauls.

Standing against the shock of the orks' first rush, Nestor parried the first blows with the blade of his narthecium, keeping the greenskins from clambering over the battered wall of crates and sandbags. He fired into the press of green bodies until his pistol was empty. He dropped the empty weapon to the ground and punched his fist into the chin of a greenskin trying to climb over the barricade, hurling it back.

Another ork swung an axe at Nestor. The Apothecary swayed back, avoiding the blow. The ork stumbled forwards as Nestor caught the creature's wrist in his empty hand, bones cracking in the Space Marine's superhuman grip. With a turn of the body, Nestor dragged the ork halfway across the crates and brought the whirring blade of the narthecium down onto its arm, shearing through just above the elbow. The ork barely noticed the injury, lifting its pistol to blaze a hail of bullets into Nestor's chest. The Apothecary replied with a straight-arm jab that plunged the narthecium blade into the creature's left eye, the spinning teeth chewing into its brain.

As Nestor ripped the narthecium back, Scalprum appeared next to him, dark orkish blood steaming from his power fist and staining the golden eagle blazoned on his chest plastron.

'Saboath is down,' said the sergeant. 'I'll hold here.'

Nestor pulled back out of the melee at the barricade and turned to see the plasma cannon-wielding Devastator on his side, his weapon lying in the grass a short distance away, still connected to Saboath by its power feed. The Dark Angel's face plate and left arm were heavily cracked and blood leaked from a long gouge down the right side of his chest.

‘What happened?’ asked Nestor, kneeling down beside the wounded Space Marine.

‘Some kind of power blade,’ Saboath replied, his voice quiet. ‘I think my secondary heart was punctured.’

‘Any damage elsewhere? How is your arm?’

‘Painful. Possible dislocation.’ The Devastator reported his injuries as dispassionately as he would explain a fault with his armour or a weapon malfunction.

Nestor removed Saboath’s helmet and examined the dilation of the blood vessels in the Space Marine’s eyes. It was less than expected, the pulse sluggish. It was likely that Saboath had been right and he was operating with only one heart. The Apothecary withdrew the bone saw and selected an adrenal booster from the narthecium.

‘This will cause some tightness in your chest. Tell me if you have difficulty breathing,’ said Nestor as he pushed the long needle into Saboath’s carotid. The Space Marine spasmed for a second as the injection mixed with his body’s boosted hormonal system.

‘That burns like the fires of Gehenna,’ Saboath spat between gritted teeth.

‘Good,’ replied Nestor. ‘That means your biscopea is still functioning.’

The Apothecary pulled open the crack in Saboath’s armour to better examine the wound. The ork power blade had cut clean through the Space Marine’s fused ribcage leaving an incision across the bone and cartilage. Investigating further, Nestor found that the tip of the weapon had grazed one of the veins leading into the secondary heart, filling the chest cavity with blood.

‘I am going to close off your secondary heart function,’ Nestor explained. ‘That will stop the internal bleeding. Damage is not critical, so I should be able to operate once I have some more time. Your blood pressure will drop. You’ll feel some loss of strength and perhaps a little light-headedness. You may find it difficult to swallow and your breathing may be affected, though I’m going to give your third lung a boost to make sure blood perfusion is maintained.’

‘Just repair me so that I can get back to the fight, brother,’ said Saboath.

Nestor nodded and set to work, injecting the secondary heart with a localised sedative and applying micro-clamps to the blood vessels to redirect the bloodstream through the Space Marine’s regular heart. He pumped out the blood already in the chest cavity and sprayed fixative foam into the wound. The foam hardened into a spongy mass within seconds, sealing the gash and hardening around the severed ribs. It was not as good as a proper reconstruction but it was

quick and provided a temporary seal for the armour. Saboath would soon be back on his feet.

With the chest injury dealt with, Nestor looked at Saboath's shoulder. After a short inspection he concurred with the Space Marine's assessment. Dislocation was easy to fix. Rolling Saboath further onto his side, Nestor opened up a panel in the side of the Space Marine's backpack. He entered his diagnostic cipher to access the traction and compression controls of the suit's fibre bundles.

'Lift your arm and straighten it as much as possible,' Nestor instructed his patient. With a grunt, Saboath complied as best he could.

'Get ready,' Nestor warned. He punched in the automated sequence required and activated the suit's internal muscle system. With a crack and a further grunt from Saboath, the armour extended the Space Marine's arm and pushed the ball joint back into place with a twist. Pleased, Nestor deactivated the system and locked down the panel.

'Watch out!' bellowed Saboath.

Nestor looked round to see the ork Dreadnought looming above the barricade, flames billowing from one of its arms, its claws closing in on Sergeant Scalprum. Heavy bolter rounds pinged off its armoured hull.

Nestor leapt across Saboath and heaved up the plasma cannon. Rolling to his back, the Apothecary fired high, aiming for the ork machine's hull. The plasma bolt smashed into the Dreadnought with a blinding explosion, knocking the machine backwards, metal droplets streaming from the molten casing. Sergeant Scalprum leapt over the barricade, swinging his power fist. Fingers splayed, the sergeant smashed his hand through the buckled metal and wrenched out a spume of wires, cables and half-crushed gears, sparks showering from the machine.

Saboath clambered to his feet, stepping over the power conduit attaching the plasma cannon to his backpack.

'I think it best if I let you have this,' said Nestor, holding out the plasma cannon. 'Try not to get involved in any hand-to-hand fighting – I don't want you losing your other heart!'

Saboath grinned and put his helmet on, giving it a twist to make the seal. He took the plasma cannon from Nestor, hefting the weapon in one hand to check its readouts.

'Thank you, Brother-Apothecary,' said Saboath. 'I will find you after the battle is won and you can finish the treatment.'

Nestor nodded and turned back to the fighting. The ork rush had been turned back with the loss of their Dreadnought. The greenskins were retreating to cover

further down the slope. To the south, where more Piscina troopers were waiting, the flank of the ork army surged again. Nestor checked his chronometer.

It was less than two hours until the reinforcements' ETA.

For an hour the orks held off, bombarding the Imperial line with the catapult and cannons. Though many of the barricades had been thrown down by the ork attacks and foxholes had caved in, this bombardment had little effect on the Free Militia and none at all on the Dark Angels. In the relative calm of air-bursting shells, Nestor had checked again on Brother Saboath's condition, refilling his suit's stimulant system from the narthecium. Normally the Apothecary wouldn't have used so much of his supply in this way, but he was beginning to agree with the predictions of Sarpedon and Scalprum: the orks simply did not have the kind of weapons that would be a threat to Space Marines, at least not in any numbers. Saboath's injury had been the worst, though several other Dark Angels had suffered minor inconveniences – a couple of broken bones and a few cuts and bullet wounds through the weaker joints of their armour.

Even the Free Militia were coping, their own medics better equipped than Nestor to treat the burns and cuts suffered by the troopers. Nestor was almost bored as desultory fire echoed back and forth between the two armies, an exchange that was not in the orks' favour.

'Are they massing for another attack?' asked Nestor.

'Possibly, brother,' replied Scalprum. 'Perhaps they await the arrival of heavier weaponry and vehicles to test us. It is an oddity that we have seen only the one Dreadnought, and nothing of their battlewagons and larger guns.'

'Such was also the case in Kadillus Harbour,' observed Nestor. 'Masses of infantry and little else. It seems our foes are poorly equipped.'

'I doubt they expected to face the wrath of the Dark Angels,' said the sergeant. There was a hint in his tone that he shared Nestor's disappointment at the lack of challenge presented by the enemy. 'If they were expecting anything at all, that is. I cannot imagine this simple scum put much planning into their campaigns. Once we regain control of the defence laser, the *Unrelenting Fury* will rain down death from the heavens and the orks will have nowhere else to hide.'

'We will still have to chase them down and eradicate them on the ground, brothers. Complacency is a foe as deadly as any other.' This was from Sarpedon, who entered the Devastators' emplacement, his robe tattered, stiff with the gore of the orks.

'As you say, Brother-Chaplain,' said Scalprum.

‘I feel the reinforcements may find their journey from the city has been wasted, brother,’ said Nestor.

‘Do not be so sure,’ replied Sarpedon. ‘Lexicanium Acutus senses something is stirring within the ork army. They are gathering their numbers and he detects some new force focussing their will. Be ready for another attack.’

‘Always, brother,’ said Scalprum.

‘Conserve ammunition and maximise your fire. I feel this battle may yet have more twists, brothers. Let us not celebrate victory before it is won.’

Nestor and Scalprum bowed their heads in deference as Sarpedon left, heading towards the Deathwing squad.

‘A new force arriving?’ said Nestor, looking at the sergeant. ‘The orks seem spent to me.’

‘The ways of the psyker are strange, brother,’ said Scalprum. ‘It is best not to delve too deeply into their mysteries.’

‘A truth I share, brother,’ replied Nestor. ‘I am more comfortable with artery and nerve than the twisting powers of the warp. Let us hope that Acutus’s suspicions are nothing more than a hunch.’

The two of them turned back to face the slope. The orks were certainly gathering from where they had been scattered by their unsuccessful attacks. A few hundred remained, a kilometre or so down the ridge. Plumes of smoke betrayed the arrival of several more vehicles. Nestor increased the magnification of his autosenses and saw three battlewagons crawling through the mobs of orks. One of the transports carried heavily armoured orks with colourful banners and a swarm of small gretchin attendees.

‘Curious,’ said Nestor. He opened the comm-channel. ‘Brother Sarpedon, direct your attention to these reinforcements. It appears that the enemy have been joined by another warlord.’

There was a pause while Sarpedon investigated Nestor’s report.

‘I concur with your observation, brother,’ the Chaplain eventually replied. ‘*Vigilus est fortis maximus*. Remain alert. Doubtless a fresh enemy attack is imminent. Let our weapons be the instruments of the Emperor’s ire.’

A few more minutes passed before the orks poured up the slopes again. Behind the defenders, the sun was almost at the horizon, an orange orb burning through the low cloud. The long shadows of the orks streamed behind them as they advanced with purpose through blood-slicked grass and across blackened dirt. The smoke from the battlewagons hung low to the ground as they followed behind the infantry, keeping pace. The few remaining bikes and buggies darted

to the north, arcing around the right flank of the ork army. It seemed that the enemy had realised the weakness of its earlier tactic and would now attack with its infantry and vehicles together.

The Piscina troopers opened fire at extreme range with their mortars, lascannons and autocannons, eager to stave off this fresh offensive. Most of their shots fell short or were wide of their targets. Around Nestor, the Devastators needed no command to hold their fire.

Oblivious to the bombs of the mortars, the orks closed together, forming three large groups each shadowed by a battlewagon. One group angled north to accompany the light vehicles, the other two came straight on, heading directly for the Dark Angels' position. The warlord seemed determined to overcome the Space Marines head-on, perhaps – correctly – perceiving them to be the biggest threat despite their small number. Amongst the green-skinned warriors, Nestor saw another of the clanking Dreadnoughts, waddling forwards on mechanical legs, oily smoke pouring from its engine.

The grumble of the vehicles' engines rumbled up the slope. Nestor listened for a moment and realised that similar noises were coming from behind him. He turned and strode the hundred metres or so to the western slope of Koth Ridge. A couple of kilometres away, he spied a column of vehicles, in the colours of the Dark Angels and Piscina Free Militia. Dark green Rhino transports advanced along the road behind the guns of a Predator tank, while further down the column came the Chimeras of the defence troopers. Two heavy Leman Russ tanks followed behind, while Assault Space Marines bounded alongside the convoy with great leaps powered by their jump packs.

The firing had intensified at the front line and Nestor hurried back, certain that Sarpedon was already in contact with the reinforcements. He arrived back in the emplacement just as the Devastators opened fire again, raining heavy bolt and plasma blasts down upon the orks.

The battlewagons returned fire, tracer bullets whipping past the Devastators' position. A blossom of fire and smoke from a turret presaged the impact of a shell, giving the Space Marines enough warning to duck back as the impromptu barricade exploded in a cloud of splinters and dirt. Falling stones rattled against Nestor as he glanced around, checking for any injuries.

Another shell exploded close to the other Devastator emplacement. As more rounds fell screaming onto the ridge it became apparent that the first strike had been a lucky hit. Explosions erupted all around the Space Marines but none were close enough to be anything more than a distraction.

While the heavy weapons of the squad continued to fire, Nestor helped Scalprum and the other brothers rebuild the barricade as best they could out of the broken remnants of the ammunition boxes and storage crates. It provided little protection against the bullets converging on them with increasing fury, but it would hamper the orks if they tried to storm the position.

More shells from the battlewagons engulfed the line, hurling shards of rock into the air. Out of instinct Nestor glanced across to the other combat squad and was taken aback by the sight. Two of the Space Marines lay draped over the barricade, one of them missing an arm, the other with his backpack ripped away, armour rent open.

Nestor sprinted across the divide as more detonations rocked the ridge. The shockwave from a nearby impact sent him off balance. He stumbled and crashed shoulder first into a jutting boulder. Righting himself in an instant, the Apothecary continued his run as the hoarse ork shouts and zing of bullets sounded ever closer.

'Who has fallen, brothers?' Nestor demanded as he leapt over the spilled dirt and broken wood from the ruptured barricade.

'It is Hasrien and Anduriel, brother,' came the reply.

Nestor attended to Hasrien first, the Space Marine who had lost his right arm and seemed most likely to survive. The shell detonation had ripped away the whole limb, leaving a ragged hole in Hasrien's shoulder. Blood leaked slowly from shredded blood vessels despite the Space Marine's quickly clotting blood. The Apothecary blotted out the sound of bolters adding to the din and concentrated on the task at hand. It was important to preserve as much of the existing skeletal, nerve and blood vessel structure as possible if a prosthetic replacement was to be viable.

Hasrien's system was pumping Larraman cells through his bloodstream, which would harden into a protective layer on contact with the air. The downside of this rapid healing with major wounds was the possibility of air bubbles being trapped in the blood vessels, leading to necrosis and cell death if the Space Marine did not receive proper treatment swiftly. Nestor applied a thinning agent to slow the process and then used the cauteriser to seal the broken vessel more completely. After injecting a cocktail of anti-inflammatory and cell-growth drugs, the Apothecary doused the open wound with a compound that would boost the scabbing effect of the Larraman cells coursing through the Space Marine's system. Within seconds the whole area was encrusted by a quickly hardening scar.

Nestor realised Hasrien was talking, an incomprehensible stream of words spilling quietly from his lips.

'The green wave of fire brings the black reproach… The retribution flame cleanses the impure… A sky swirls with delight, bringing the stench of justice…'

Carefully turning the Space Marine's head, Nestor found a wide gash carved into his helmet by a piece of shrapnel. The wound did not appear to be deep, and already the scab was thick and infection-proof. The Apothecary activated his interpersonal comm.

'Brother Hasrien? This is Brother Nestor. What do you feel?'

'The whiteness of fraternity bonds with the black wall,' came the hushed reply. Hasrien's good arm twitched, his fingers forming a fist.

Conventional brain damage seemed unlikely: the wound had barely scratched the Space Marine's hardened skull. Nestor searched through his memory, recalling all of the rites of diagnosis, but there was nothing that matched this symptom.

The only thing that was remotely familiar was a malfunction in the catalepsean node – a small organ implanted in the cortex to allow a Space Marine to rest different parts of his brain without sleeping. The dream-like whispering would be explained by damage to that organ. Perhaps the blow had involuntarily activated it or somehow displaced it. As it was, Hasrien was in no fit state to fight: the catalepsean node was only employed on extended duty as it obscured the focus required for effective combat.

At a loss concerning what else to do, Nestor helped Hasrien sit up. There was no function of the narthecium that would help. With nothing else springing to mind, the Apothecary brought his fist down sharply against the uninjured side of the Space Marine's helmet, jolting his head to the side. Hasrien slowly turned his head to the left and right and then looked up at the Apothecary, the lenses of his autosenses focussing on Nestor's face.

'Brother Nestor?' said Hasrien. 'I thought it was you.'

'What is your name? Where are you?'

'I am Brother Hasrien of Squad Scalprum, Third Company of the Dark Angels. Present location is Koth Ridge, Piscina IV, Piscina System.' Hasrien looked to his right and then back at the Apothecary. 'I appear to have lost an arm, brother, or did I just dream that?'

Nestor grabbed the Space Marine's remaining wrist and helped him to his feet.

'You have lost your arm, brother, but there is still fighting to be done,' said the

Apothecary, slapping his bolt pistol in Hasrien's remaining hand. 'The Emperor expects you to fight until you can fight no more.'

'Thank you, Brother-Apothecary,' replied Hasrien, a finger curling around the trigger of the pistol. 'I shall speak your name to the Lion when I am next in chapel.'

Nestor watched the battle-brother rejoining the three other members of his combat squad, pistol at the ready. A moment later Hasrien was firing into the approaching orks, showing no after-effects from his strange episode.

Nestor turned his attention to Anduriel.

The Apothecary assessed the damage clinically, but was forced to conclude that Anduriel's condition was best described as 'a bloody mess'. Skin, fat, muscle, bone and organs had been mashed together by the blast; the damage to the Space Marine and his armour was such that Nestor assumed he had taken a direct hit from the battlewagon shell. Nestor activated the interpersonal link again.

'Can you hear me, Brother Anduriel?'

The Space Marine's reply was barely a whisper, wheezed between laboured breaths.

'You sound far away, brother,' said Anduriel. 'I can feel nothing and everything is dark. Are my battle-brothers safe? I tried to shield them from the explosion.'

'Your brothers are still fighting,' Nestor told him. 'I cannot heal your wounds, brother.'

There was a long pause before Anduriel spoke again.

'I understand, brother,' he said. 'I have yet to pass on my gene-seed. Please recover it for the Chapter.'

'I will, Anduriel, I will,' Nestor said, straddling the face-down Space Marine. 'There will be no pain.'

'I feel nothing at all,' said Anduriel as Nestor set to work.

The Apothecary chanted the canticles of mercy as he removed Anduriel's helmet and laid it to one side. Placing his left palm on the back of the Space Marine's head, he fired the narthecium's pneumatic spike, plunging twelve inches of reinforced alloy through the Space Marine's neck and into his brain. It was the quickest and least painful way to despatch an Astartes – a Space Marine's boosted immune system and enhanced physiology would fight against lethal injections, causing discomfort and distress.

Nestor checked that Anduriel was truly dead and set about his next task. With scalpels and saw he cut away the spine and tissue obscuring the progenoid gland located at the base of the Space Marine's neck. It was a delicate process, but

Nestor's armoured fingers worked with the practiced ease of five decades' experience. He took a zero-vac containment vial from his belt and opened it, placing the jar in the dirt beside Anduriel. With two more cuts and a twist, he pulled the progenoid free. Grey and glistening, it sat in the palm of his hand. Within, the gland contained all of the DNA material of the Dark Angels, dormant and sterile, ready to be grown into fresh organs for a future recruit. Nurtured inside a battle-brother, it was the greatest gift to the Chapter a Space Marine could give.

Quickly placing the progenoid into the flask and sealing it, Nestor considered the best course of action to retrieve the twin organ in Anduriel's chest. It would be quicker to cut through and retrieve it from behind the Space Marine's thick breastplate, so Nestor set about cutting away sections of the spine and ribs, slicing away at the anterior muscles until he could see into the chest cavity. There were a few organs in the way, which Nestor efficiently cut free and placed to one side. As before, he readied a containment flask and removed the progenoid from its cluster of blood vessels, securing the precious gene-seed at his belt inside a rigid pouch. He placed the parts he had removed back inside the Space Marine's body and sealed the gaping hole with bio-foam. Anduriel would be returned to the Chapter as whole as possible. Honour and dignity demanded it.

Standing up, Nestor looked around and to his surprise realised the battle was won. He had been so engrossed in his gory work he had paid no attention to the roar of tank engines cresting the ridge or the boom of cannons ripping apart the ork lines. Looking east, he saw two battlewagons careering away down the slope, followed by a few dozen orks on foot. The black bikes of a Ravenwing squadron raced after them, gunning down more of the greenskins as they fled.

The Apothecary looked down at Anduriel and commended the fallen warrior's spirit to the Emperor and the Lion. It seemed a shame that Anduriel had not lived to see the victory he had helped to achieve. Such was the fate of all Space Marines eventually, whether young like Anduriel, or as old as the veterans of the Deathwing.

Nestor took heart from the fact that his ministrations of the day had ensured two battle-brothers would survive to fight again. To become lost in regret and mourning would be a disservice to those who had given their lives for the Imperium across the ten thousand years of the Dark Angels' existence. Anduriel had fought well, with skill and courage, and now he knew the peace of death. Nestor hoped that when it was his time, he would pass with equal honour.

Though the orks had suffered terribly as a result of their assault on Koth Ridge – estimates placed enemy casualties at seventy-five per cent for a relative few Imperial fallen – the news from Kadillus Harbour was not so encouraging. Nestor listened as Master Chaplain Uriel explained the situation to Brother Sarpedon and Colonel Haynes of the Free Militia.

'The orks are stubbornly resisting any attempt to dislodge them from the docks,' said Uriel. 'Twice in the last day they have attempted to break out of our cordon, and both times they have been held back by the slimmest of margins. Ghazghkull is probably unaware that this attempt to link with the city has failed, but if there are more orks to the east we can expect them to try again. Even with the Piscina defence force, there are not enough warriors to effectively garrison both the city and Koth Ridge.'

A shout from a picket of defence troopers down the slope interrupted the Chaplain. Nestor turned with the others to see what was causing the commotion. A vague shape emerged from one of the narrow gulleys a few hundred metres away and resolved into the figure of a Scout-sergeant, cameleoline cloak tossed back over one shoulder. As the bloodied and dirty warrior strode up the slope, Nestor recognised the new arrival as Sergeant Naaman of the 10th Company. He carried his bolter in both hands and had a sniper rifle slung over one shoulder. Of his squad and the Ravenwing squadron that had accompanied him into the east, there was no sign.

Nestor hurried down to Naaman, noticing the Space Marine had a limp and that some of the blood that stained his armour and uniform was his own. The Scout-sergeant waved away any attempt at assistance.

'Thank you for your concern, brother, but I have a more urgent need,' said Naaman. His eyes were intent through the mask of dried blood that covered his face. 'I need a long-range comm. I *must* speak with Master Belial.'

Sarpedon joined the pair and escorted Naaman to Uriel's Rhino, where the Master Chaplain was already stabilising the command link. Naaman took the proffered pick-up from Uriel and slumped down onto the transport's ramp, bolter cradled in his lap. The battered-looking sergeant coughed once, took a deep breath and thumbed the activation rune.

'Brother-Captain Belial? This is Veteran Sergeant Naaman, requesting permission to make my report.'

# THE TALE OF NAAMAN

## SHADOW WARRIORS

Master Belial listened without interruption while Naaman delivered his lengthy account of what had happened in the east. Naaman simply laid out the facts of the mission: the times, places and sightings of the enemy. He held back his observations on what this information might mean to the Dark Angels' strategy and allowed Belial a few minutes to digest the information and consult with his advisors.

He waited close to Uriel's Rhino for the master's return signal, watching the Piscina defence troopers digging shallow graves for their fallen comrades. Several dozen more arrived along the road as dusk darkened the ridge. Some of the men were detailed to assist Apothecary Nestor as he removed Brother Anduriel's remains from the field. The eight men lifted up the dead Space Marine with as much dignity as they could muster, but the strain soon cut through their solemn expressions and they were puffing and sweating by the time they lowered Anduriel into the back of one of the Rhinos.

One young trooper caught the sergeant's eye. He leaned against the hull of the transport, mopping the sweat from his face with his sleeve, raking his fingers through his thick blond hair. There was dust and blood on his uniform, which didn't fit well: tight across his wide shoulders, baggy along his short legs.

Naaman wondered what it was like to face something like the orks as a normal man. Like his battle-brothers, the sergeant saw himself as a military asset, and the preservation of his life was a tactical objective: the preservation of force. Several times in the past day he had come close to dying, but it was the potential of failing his mission that had motivated him to survive, not an emotional attachment to his continued existence. He knew that his deeds and his memory would live on through the Chapter – and quite literally through the gene-seed he

had incubated within his body – so he felt none of the sense of ending that other men might feel about death. Even his name was something that Naaman was only borrowing from the Dark Angels; he knew the stories of twenty-six Brother Naamans that had come before and also knew that the twenty-eighth Brother Naaman would learn of his actions.

The young trooper, on the other hand, went against the enemy not knowing if he would be remembered or forgotten, or even noticed. He was just one amongst many thousands – Naaman was one amongst a thousand – and there was little chance his acts, heroic or cowardly as they might be, would ever be recorded for posterity. Millions of men like him died every day to protect and expand the realm of the Emperor. Looking at the blond-haired youth, Naaman was reminded of an Imperial saying: *for every battle honour, a thousand heroes die alone, unsung and unremembered.*

Naaman strode across the ridge to the group of troopers catching their breath. They turned and stared at him as he approached. The sergeant ignored their surprise and raised his fist in salute to the blond-haired trooper.

'What is your name?' he asked.

'Trooper Tauno,' the man replied hesitantly. 'Can I help you, er, sergeant?'

'Just remember to do your duty and fight as if the Emperor Himself watches you,' said Naaman.

'I will, sergeant,' Tauno said, his gaze flickering nervously to his companions.

Naaman nodded and returned to the command Rhino, ignoring the confused whispers that erupted from the squad. Naaman could have heard them if he so decided, but it was better for the men to have their gossip to themselves.

The comm rune was blinking when he returned and he snatched up the handset.

'This is Veteran Sergeant Naaman.'

'Naaman, this is Master Belial. I cannot risk the *Unrelenting Fury* for a sensor sweep of the East Barrens geothermal plant. In your estimation, what is the strength of the remaining ork forces to the east?'

'Any figure I could tell you would be a wild guess, brother-captain,' replied Naaman. 'It seems that the majority of the force I witnessed was destroyed earlier today, but whether that accounts for all, some or only a small part of the enemy army is unknown.'

'It occurs to me that you would have seen any ship capable of holding a much larger force.'

'I am not sure that the geothermal station was the landing site, brother-captain. It may simply have been a staging area for a ship further into the Barrens. The

lack of heavier vehicles, particularly large battle fortresses and war machines, suggests that as remarkable as it may seem, we may have only encountered a vanguard of a much larger force.'

'I find it hard to agree with that assessment, sergeant,' said Belial. 'We have already encountered two sizeable ork armies. It is highly unlikely that several vessels made it planetside without detection.'

'It is improbable, brother-captain, but not impossible. Without any confirmation regarding the size and location of the landing zone, any observations are pure speculation.'

There was a pause; Naaman assumed the company commander was deciding what to do. He did not envy Belial the choice ahead of him. There were no troops to spare from the fighting in Kadillus Harbour, but if there was still a significant threat from the east, the battle in the city would be rendered pointless.

The comm crackled again.

'It is my current view that the threat from the east has been neutralised. Any remaining ork forces will be scattered. It is imperative that these remnants are not allowed to regroup. I will order an eastward push towards Indola to clear any remaining resistance. This will be an advance-in-force, sergeant. I will send Sergeant Damas and his Scouts to join with you at Koth Ridge and you will provide standard reconnaissance and support observation for the eastward push. Confirm.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. Join with Squad Damas and recon to the east alongside the main force.'

'Very well, brother-sergeant. Your action in the East Barrens is exemplary of the finest traditions of the Chapter. Though not full battle-brothers, the names of your fallen Scouts will be added to the Roll of Honour for the war, alongside Sergeant Aquila and his squadron. The Third Company owes the Tenth Company a debt for the service you have provided these last few days and your part in our victory will be lauded by your brothers.'

'I thank you for honouring the fallen, brother-captain. I will also honour them with my continued dedication to victory. Do you wish to speak to Brother Sarpedon?'

'Master Uriel is now the force commander. Please bring him to the comm, sergeant.'

Naaman hung up the handset and attracted Uriel's attention. As the Master Chaplain broke away from his discussions with the Free Militia colonel, Naaman walked away and sat down with his back to a low rock, facing east. The cloud

had thinned and evening stars glimmered on the horizon, while the first curve of a moonrise crept into view. It would be some time before Damas arrived from the city.

Naaman closed his eyes and was instantly asleep.

With more Free Militia forces arriving from across Kadillus and air-lifted from other parts of Piscina, the defence of Koth Ridge was looking more secure as Naaman and Squad Damas set out ahead of the Imperial advance. Artillery positions were being dug, linked by a growing network of trenches and emplacements. With the Free Militia continuing to dig in, the Dark Angels pressed eastwards from the ridge.

Naaman and Sergeant Damas led their Scouts along the southern flank a few kilometres ahead of the other Dark Angels. There was little sign of the orks; what debris and trails Naaman found indicated that the new warlord had retired hurriedly eastwards again, probably to regroup or perhaps to escape. Belial's orders were straightforward: hunt down the orks and annihilate them before they could recover.

Just after mid-morning, Naaman received a comm-message on the long-range set Sergeant Damas had brought from Kadillus Harbour. It was a general transmission from the pilot on board one of the company's three Thunderhawk gunships, which had been sent on an overflight mission of the East Barrens power plant.

'This is *Zealous Guardian,* Brother Hadrazael in command. *Extremis vindicus*. Contacting Task Force Uriel. Please confirm reception of this signal.'

'Confirm, *Zealous Guardian*. This is Vet–'

'*Zealous Guardian,* Master Uriel receiving your transmission,' the force commander cut across Naaman. The Scout-sergeant motioned for the squad to halt and take cover while he listened to the exchange.

'Sustained damage from anti-air fire in vicinity of East Barrens thermal plant. Losing altitude. Please confirm reception readiness for report.'

'I can hear you, Hadrazael,' said Uriel. 'Deliver your report.'

'Approaching sensor sweeps detected growing life-form presence in the area around the East Barrens plant. Large energy spike also detected. We approached on a circling course at two kilometres distance. Visually identified numerous enemy in and around the facility, estimate one hundred or more orks. No visual identification to corroborate with energy spike signature. Engaged by multiple-missile anti-aircraft vehicle of unknown design. Exotic gravimetric field

warhead as well as explosives. Stabilisation systems lost, instruments erratic. Visual estimate of altitude is at four thousand metres and falling.'

'*Zealous Guardian*, this is Uriel. Describe composition of enemy forces at power plant.'

'No war engines or sizeable armour seen. No static defences. Buggies, Dreadnoughts and bikes in low number. Mostly infantry, Brother-Chaplain. Transmission ending. Impact imminent.'

'Naaman!' Damas's shout dragged the sergeant's attention away from the comm-set.

A dozen kilometres or so to the east, a dark shape plummeted out of the clouds trailing fire and smoke. It cleared the line of ridges and seemed to settle on a stable course for a few hundred metres. Naaman could imagine Hadrazael struggling at the controls trying to wrestle the blocky aircraft with damaged mechanical systems and brute strength; the Thunderhawk's borderline aerodynamics required complex automated systems and gravity-dampeners to stay airworthy and without them Hadrazael's only option was to slow the inevitable descent as much as was possible and crash-land.

The Thunderhawk's nose dipped suddenly. Naaman could hear the whining of the *Zealous Guardian*'s engines as they were throttled into reverse. The heavily armoured gunship bobbed once, and then dived almost vertically, smashing into the ground. Stubby wings, armoured plates and tail planes spun out of the dust cloud. Naaman whipped out his monocular and through the haze and dirt could see the Thunderhawk lying on its side about four kilometres away. There was no sign of smoke or flames.

'Secure that wreck site,' Naaman snapped to the others. 'Full run. There could be orks in that area.'

As the others set off towards the rising column of dust, Naaman activated the long-range comm.

'Master Uriel, this is Naaman. We have located the crash site and are moving to secure. Any further instructions?'

'Negative, brother-sergeant. Establish condition of crew and viability of gunship retrieval. If the Thunderhawk cannot be recovered, activate the on-board charges and destroy it. If possible, retrieve sensor logs before destruction.'

'Understood, Brother-Chaplain. Will report on our arrival.'

Naaman ran after the others, bolter in one hand, comm-piece in the other. He jabbed the standard tactical frequency into the digipad.

'*Zealous Guardian,* do you receive? Brother Hadrazael?'

There was no reply.

Damas led his Scouts in a circuitous sweep around the wreck, knowing that the crash would have attracted any orks in the area. While the Scouts patrolled, Naaman headed straight for the Thunderhawk. It was laid on the port side of the fuselage, at the end of a furrow more than a hundred metres long. The hull armour had been ripped away along with the wing and starboard portion of the tail. The starboard and fuselage engines emanated a thick haze of heat. Metal pinged and cracked as it settled. The armoured canopy of the cockpit appeared to be intact but there were shards of rock scattered in front of the Thunderhawk's path where it had struck a large boulder before being halted.

'This is Sergeant Naaman, approaching from the south-west,' he called out, cupping a hand to his mouth. It was better than relying on the comm, and he had no desire to be shot by his own battle-brothers.

The assault ramp was blocked by the awkward angle of the wreckage. Naaman used the edge of the buckled roof armour as hand and footholds, pulling himself up the six metres to the almost-horizontal starboard side of the fuselage.

'This is Damas. Area is clear of enemy.'

'Confirm, Damas. Set up perimeter on my position, brother.'

'Affirmative. Three-hundred-metre perimeter on the wreck site.'

Naaman padded along the length of the hull to the service hatch just behind the main cockpit area. Crouching, he punched the activation rune. There was a hiss of released gas, but the small door did not move. Slinging his bolter strap over his shoulder, Naaman opened up the manual crank and grabbed the half-wheel in both hands. With a quarter-clockwise turn, he unlocked the manual bolts and heaved the hatch free, tossing it to the ground.

'Brothers?' Naaman's voice echoed tinnily from the interior of the gunship. 'This is Naaman.'

He heard a muffled reply, probably from the cockpit. A screech of twisting metal and a thump reverberated along the hull.

'Can you hear me now, brother?' came the voice again.

'Brother Hadrazael? This is Naaman, Tenth Company.'

'The fore bulkhead has sheared, blocking the entranceway. I need your help to move it.'

'Is there anybody else on board?' Naaman asked, dropping through the hatchway.

He landed on the door on the opposite side. It was strange to see the inside of

the Thunderhawk at a ninety-degree angle. Naaman glanced around to orientate himself.

'Brother Mephael was in the port weapons seat when we hit,' said Hadrazael. 'I think he is dead. Check on him first.'

Naaman clambered aft along the tilted fuselage, stepping over equipment that had fallen out of the lockers, picking his way past fallen ceiling plates and dislodged cabling. He located the gunnery control position for the dorsal cannon, midway along the hull. He found the top half of a Space Marine trapped under a twisted support strut. He wore no backpack, helmet or shoulder pads, as was usual onboard a gunship. Not that their protection would have helped. There was no sign of Mephael's legs; Naaman assumed they had been ripped off in the crash. Without hope, the sergeant checked for signs of life, and found none.

He scrambled back to the cockpit, where the front bulkhead had buckled and torn away from the ceiling, closing off the doorway to the cockpit. Through a small triangular gap, he could see Brother Hadrazael peering through at him.

'Mephael's dead, brother,' said Naaman. 'Let us get you out of there. Is the comm unit disabled?'

'Affirmative, brother,' said Hadrazael. 'Mephael's harness release had jammed. I had released my own to assist him when the ship nose-dived. I believe it was the impact of my head that broke the comm.'

'Are you injured?'

Hadrazael laughed.

'Not significantly. The control console was hurt more than I was! Pull from your side and I will push from mine, brother-sergeant.'

Naaman grabbed the broken bulkhead, his thick gauntlets protecting his palms against the sharp edges. He braced a foot on the lip of an observation portal and pulled back. He heard a grunt from within the cockpit as Hadrazael leaned his weight against the reinforced metal. The bulkhead scraped a few centimetres, opening more of a gap. Using his bolter as a lever, Naaman prised the gap wider until Hadrazael could push his arm through.

'Step back, brother,' warned the pilot. 'I'll take a run-up.'

Naaman retreated a few metres from the doorway. A few rapid thuds of Hadrazael's boots rang from the ship and then he smashed into the bulkhead. With a wrenching screech, the fallen wall parted from its surviving bolts and clanged down, Hadrazael falling on top of it. Naaman helped the pilot to his feet.

'Sensor logs, brother?' Naaman asked.

The pilot pulled a datacrystal from a pouch at his belt.

‘Already uploaded, brother.’

Hadrazael searched through the equipment lockers and scattered debris and located his helmet and pads. His backpack was still secure in its recharging alcove, but could not be released. Naaman climbed outside first, quickly noticing the Scouts patrolling around the downed Thunderhawk. He dropped to the ground as Hadrazael extricated himself from the wreck.

‘Command, this is Sergeant Naaman,’ he called over the comm. ‘Brother Hadrazael is fully combat-functional. Brother Mephael is dead. Sensor logs intact. Request Rhino pick-up from the crash site.’

The comm buzzed for thirty seconds. Confused by the delay, Naaman transmitted his report again. After a few more seconds, he heard the voice of Brother Sarpedon.

‘Naaman, this is Sarpedon. Negative on your request, brother. Force encountering increasing resistance. Ork numbers higher than anticipated. No Rhinos are available at this time. Escort Brother Hadrazael and the scanner data to Koth Ridge.’

‘What has happened to Brother Uriel, Brother-Chaplain?’ asked Naaman.

‘Contact lost with force commander three minutes ago. Ravenwing Sergeant Validus reports intense fighting on the north flank. I am diverting the task force to counter the attack. Proceed to Koth Ridge on your new orders. Confirm.’

‘Confirm, Brother-Chaplain. Escort to Koth Ridge.’

Naaman called Damas and the others to gather around. He related what was happening to the rest of the force with a frown.

‘Just how many orks did you see at the power plant?’ Damas quizzed Hadrazael.

‘At least one hundred infantry,’ replied the battle-brother.

‘Even if they all left immediately and headed westwards, that’s not enough to account for the resistance the others are encountering,’ said Damas.

‘No, it isn’t, brothers,’ said Naaman, keeping his suspicions to himself. Returning to Koth Ridge seemed like a good idea. He needed to speak with Belial.

The wind had shifted to the south and brought with it a cold edge from the sea as night fell. Naaman waited patiently for his contact request to be answered by Master Belial, and he stood watching Hadrazael having his injury treated by Apothecary Nestor. In the dying light, Naaman’s eyes scoured the ridge for the trooper, Tauno. There was no sign of him. The veteran sergeant did not know

why he was so interested in the youth: he was just one of hundreds randomly picked from the mass of soldiers manning the defence line. It was that randomness that held the appeal; Naaman could have picked any of the men and he was sure the story of the man's life would not be so different.

He watched the troopers with narrowed eyes. There were so many tiny differences: short or tall; fat or thin; old or young; brave or cowardly; clever or stupid. None of those differences meant anything. For the most part they were simply a finger on a lasgun trigger. In the grandest scheme of all, the great Imperium stretching across a million worlds, each of their lives was wholly pointless.

There was nothing remarkable about any of them.

Each of those men had no more impact upon the fate of the galaxy than a piece of sand would have on the orbit of a planet. But like anything else, it was quantity that mattered. Enough sand, one grain at a time, could tip a planet on its axis; enough men could decide the future of worlds or the entire destiny of mankind. One human was unimportant; a million were hard to ignore; a billion…

Tauno was just one unimpressive man, but he was one amongst countless billions. He had picked up a lasgun, for reasons Naaman could probably never understand, and decided to fight. On his own, he was nothing. With nine other men, he was a squad. With hundreds of other men, they were a company. Dozens of companies made a regiment. On and on, one man after another, becoming divisions and army groups and crusades, utterly unaware of each other, spread across thousands of star systems. Tauno was just a man picked from a crowd, but he was all of them. He was mankind, rendered down into a single body and reduplicated over and over and over.

That was what Naaman found so remarkable.

The sergeant smiled to himself and wondered if he should write his observations down. The Teachings of Naaman? It was better to leave the philosophy to other, more educated minds. The true teachings of Naaman were with bolter and blade, camo-cloak and sniper rifle. Those were useful lessons for an aspiring Space Marine to learn.

The chime of the comm interrupted his thoughts. He thumbed the reception stud on the headset.

'This is Sergeant Naaman.'

'This is Master Belial. Brother Sarpedon is leading the remnants of the task force back to Koth Ridge.'

‘Remnants, brother-captain?’ Naaman could not keep the shock from his voice.

‘Your earlier assessment of the enemy numbers seems to be more accurate than mine, Naaman,’ said Belial. It was a statement of fact, not an apology or admittance. ‘Ork strength to the east has increased again. I cannot account for the appearance of these new forces. It is not only illogical, it is out of character for the orks to leave behind such a strong reserve. Why were these forces not committed to the initial attack on the city, or in the second advance on the ridge? It seems that the enemy is arriving in waves. I must know the strength of the third wave.’

‘I will find the answers, brother-captain,’ said Naaman. ‘If I can locate the ork ship, it should be possible to make a correct gauge of their strength. Better still, it may be possible to destroy the site from orbit.’

‘That is a risky proposition, brother-sergeant,’ replied Belial. ‘It is imperative that this new ork wave does not reach the city. To provide the troops necessary, I am suspending offensive action in Kadillus Harbour and moving to a containment strategy to keep the orks in the docks. I cannot retake the defence-laser silo at this juncture.’

The company commander hesitated. When he continued there was an odd note in his voice, a slight reluctance in his quiet words. Naaman listened without comment.

‘On my instruction, Brother-Librarian Charon has sent an astropathic message to the rest of the Chapter, warning them of the worsening situation on Piscina. I expect Grand Master Azrael to divert additional resources on receipt of this message. Such help will be at least ten days away. If we can destroy the ork ship and any reinforcements, this diversion of the Chapter will not be required and Charon will cancel the call for aid.

‘I need you to find out what is happening, Naaman. I do not want any more surprises. You have been further east than anybody else. You *must* bypass the orks and make a direct investigation of the East Barrens geothermal station.’

‘Confirm, brother-captain. Am I to take Squad Damas with me?’

‘Affirmative. Ensure that all in your patrol know how to use the long-range communicator.’

‘I do not expect any of us to return, brother-captain. Survival on such a mission is typically zero-point-seven per cent. If it pleases you, I would request that the members of Squad Damas be honoured in the Chapter records as battle-brothers. Their sacrifice should be remembered.’

‘I concur, Brother Naaman. *In perpetuis Leo gravitas excelsior*. Walk in the

Lion's shadow without fear. Emperor speed you to victory.'

'I have no fear, brother-captain. I am Astartes. I am that which others fear.'

When the link was cut, Naaman spoke privately with Sergeant Damas, explaining the difficult mission they had been tasked with.

'You and I both know that none of us is likely to get through the orks' lines and back again, Naaman,' said Damas. 'Do you wish to inform the Scouts of this factor?'

'They are your squad, brother, it is up to you,' Naaman replied with a light shrug.

'Then I see no advantage in telling them this will be a one-way trip. Knowledge of this will cause apprehension, which will have a negative effect on combat performance and therefore decrease the chances of success.'

'I concur,' said Naaman. 'The odds of survival are exceptionally low but there is no need to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy.'

'You've been out there and back twice already; if anyone can bring us back it will be you, brother,' Damas said, slapping a hand to Naaman's arm.

The Scouts reached the Indola Mines just before nightfall by commandeering one of the defence force's Chimera transports. There was no report of the orks west of Indola and Naaman had judged correctly that speed had been preferable to stealth. After despatching the worried Free Militia driver and his vehicle back to Koth Ridge, Naaman and the others lay up in the mines until night shrouded the East Barrens. For two hours they waited, scanning the horizon with monoculars, alert for any ork activity.

They saw no sign of the greenskins.

Naaman called Damas and his squad together as the first of Piscina's moons rose as a sliver in the eastern sky. The wind had freshened from the south, coming off the sea, bringing a haze of cloud that did little to obscure the stars.

'There is no merit in delaying our departure,' Naaman told the others. 'It is unlikely the cloud cover will increase. Our mission is to penetrate the ork lines and reach the next series of ridges just westwards of the East Barrens geothermal station. There is no accurate intelligence on the orks' numbers or deployment. All that we know is our task force was halted and driven back, which indicates the orks have enough strength to mount a serious offensive. We are not here to kill orks – that will come later. None of you will engage the enemy without express orders from me or Sergeant Damas.'

Naaman took a deep breath, the air frosting in front of his face.

‘We cannot be detected. If the orks become aware of our presence, not only will they attempt to hunt us down, we will have no opportunity to investigate the power plant. Mission success depends upon us moving like ghosts. Sergeant Damas will lead the way, I will follow you. Communication will be limited to sub-vocal comms. Our foes may be crude, but do not mistake them for being stupid. Confirm?’

There was a hushed chorus of affirmatives. Naaman nodded in satisfaction and signalled for Damas to move out. As the Scouts filed out of a gateway following a winding track to the east, Naaman stopped for a moment and checked his equipment one last time. Along with a bolt pistol, chainsword and grenades, he had a special piece of wargear that had been brought to him by Brother Hephaestus just before the Scouts had left Koth Ridge.

The cylindrical container looked unimpressive. It was about the length of his forearm, made of plain metal save for a runepad on one end and a comm-socket in the other. Inside was a different matter. Once erected, the teleport homer would send a sub-warp signal to the *Unrelenting Fury* in orbit above the planet. On board, Sergeant Adamanta waited with four of his fellow Deathwing Terminators. Within minutes of the beacon’s activation, they would be able to teleport to the surface and provide support. It was a last-ditch strategy – the arrival of a teleporting squad was the antithesis of stealth – but if the mission was in serious danger of failure, the extra firepower could prove crucial.

Naaman knelt down and laid the teleport homer in the grass. Drawing a cable from the long-range comm-set, he plugged himself into its transmitter. He punched in the test-sequence on the keypad and waited.

‘Teleport frequency locked-in.’

The droning voice came from one of the faceless servitors wired into the comm boards on the battle-barge. Little more than a processor embodied in a once-human shell, the servitor reeled off a stream of frequency data and coordinates. Checking his digimap, Naaman confirmed that the signal location was being accurately traced to within three metres. Confident that the beacon was operating properly, he cancelled the test signal and detached himself from the comm-link.

Using a magnetic clamp, Naaman strapped the device to his left thigh and stood up. Damas and the others had become shadows in the darkness, their cameleoline cloaks blending with the dark blues and greys of the night. If Naaman had not known where they would be – and benefited from the augmentation to his eyes that all Space Marines underwent – he would not have seen them at all.

Wrapping his cloak around him, Naaman headed after them, merging with the darkness.

Progress was slow but steady. Damas and Naaman ordered the squad to halt every few hundred metres so that they could sweep the surrounding wilderness with the monoculars. The Scouts did not hurry, but kept a steady pace that gradually swallowed up the kilometres between Indola and the power plant. They had covered about half the distance when Damas attracted Naaman's attention during one of the routine observation stops. The two sergeants met atop a low hill covered with waist-high brush.

'Three kilometres east,' said Damas as the pair crouched amongst a scrub of waxy-leaved grass. 'Thermal signature. Vehicle, perhaps?'

Naaman looked for himself and saw the orange glow of a heat haze through the monocular. The signature looked too hot and localised to be engines.

'Campfire,' Naaman said.

Damas looked again and grunted to himself.

'Of course it is. There are two more, about five hundred metres apart, to the north of the first. What is our plan?'

Naaman swept his view south and saw more campfires, a kilometre or more further away than the ones directly east, spread haphazardly across the Barrens. Some were close to each other, but he could see a path through that headed south-east and then cut to the north-east. If this was meant to be some kind of picket, it was a clumsy one.

Naaman pointed out the safe route to Damas.

'I concur,' said the other sergeant. 'No vehicle lights, but there is the possibility of roaming patrols between the camps.'

Naaman patted his bolt pistol.

'That is why we have these,' he said with a grin, which was copied by Damas, who drew his combat knife.

'I prefer this,' said Damas.

'The Lion's blessings come to us each in different ways,' replied Naaman. 'Prepare your squad to move out and I will make one last sweep.'

Damas pushed through the bushes and disappeared while Naaman scanned the rising ground for any sign of movement. He saw nothing and it seemed likely the orks had settled into their camps for the night. Naaman was unhappy that the wind had shifted direction; in the darkness the stench of the greenskins would have been just as much a warning as anything that might be seen. As it was, they

would have to carry on in the same cautious manner. The slowness of their infiltration irked Naaman, as he was sure that come sunrise, the orks would move west again, and that could be very dangerous.

Padding silently through the night, the Scouts picked their way between the campsites. Concealed by the darkness and their cloaks, there was little chance the orks, night-blinded by their fires, would see the Dark Angels Scouts moving wraith-like from gulley to hill to winding river bank. Damas led them on a course that kept them as low as possible, avoiding high ground. The soil underfoot grew thinner and the rocky subsurface of Kadillus broke through in patches scattered with rocks and pebbles. The Scouts moved around these areas, keeping to the dwindling grass where possible.

Just after midnight Damas's barely audible whisper over the comm halted the squad. Naaman glided through the night, bolt pistol in hand, and joined the other sergeant at the head of the advance. He saw immediately what had caused the stop.

A little more than a hundred metres ahead, a diminutive figure sat on a rock, a flare-muzzled gun in its lap. It was a gretchin, one of the orks' small slave-companions. At first Naaman thought it was dozing, but there came a flash of red from its eyes in the growing moonlight as the wiry creature looked this way and that.

'There's another one over there,' hissed Damas, pointing a little to Naaman's right. 'And a third up on that hill.'

Over the wind, Naaman caught a brief flurry of sound: two high-pitched voices that seemed to be arguing. They were close, within fifty metres, to the left and almost behind the Scouts. Dropping to his belly, Naaman crawled through the grass in the direction of the noise, bolt pistol held out in front of him.

His course brought him to the lip of a shallow dell. In the middle of the depression two gretchin were ineffectually fighting, wrestling with each other and biting at each other's long, pointed ears. Naaman had no idea what they were saying but guessed that the source of the dispute was the thick-barrelled pistol that kept swapping between them during the scuffle.

Naaman slid closer, parting the grass with his free hand, eyes fixed on the squabbling sentries. As he rose to a crouch, cloak folded around him, Naaman aimed at the pair. They were so close he could have thrown his pistol at them, but they kept moving back and forth in their struggle, occasionally one or the other tumbling to the dirt before leaping back to its feet to resume the fight. Naaman's pistol followed them.

For a split-second, the two gretchin were locked together. One had its back to him, holding the pistol behind its back, a clawed hand in the face of the other, which had its skinny fingers tightening around its opponent's throat.

With barely a puff of decompressing gas, Naaman fired. The silenced bolt-round struck the closest gretchin in the back of the skull, blowing its head apart. The other stared wide-eyed at Naaman through the bubbling mess of blood and brains, bony hands still clasped around the throat of its companion's corpse. Naaman's second shot took the survivor in the eye and two headless bodies flopped to the ground.

Creeping up the far side of the depression, Naaman checked to the east. He could see glimmers of movement as the third of Piscina's moons slid above the horizon, casting a pale blue glow through the clouds. Despite the extra light it was hard to see the gretchin as they wandered about on their erratic patrols or stood sentry between the dozens of campfires. As the ground rose steadily into the next ridge, it undulated steeply, making it hard to see over the next lip.

'*Thermis tapeta*,' Naaman whispered to the squad via the comm. He pulled down his autosight goggles and thumbed through the spectral modes until he reached the far-infrared setting. The Barrens became a shifting landscape of dark blues and purples, broken by the bright yellow and white of flames. Here and there he saw the dark red blobs of the gretchin and the slightly brighter silhouettes of the orks heated by the fires.

There seemed to be no certain way through the cluster of campfires directly eastwards, but a detour to the south would add several kilometres to the journey. Naaman checked the chronometer display. Total moonfall would occur within three hours. In the utter darkness, it would be easier to slip through the ork camps. He reached a decision.

'Assemble on my position,' he told the squad.

He watched the Scouts approaching through his thermal vision. Naaman glimpsed only an occasional patch of face or exposed wrist, the cameleoline diffusing the heat signature of the Scouts' bodies. Like will o' the wisps the squad gathered on the edge of the depression.

'We have to wait until moonfall before we carry on,' Naaman said. 'We are too exposed here. Have any of you seen a suitable defensive position?'

'There is a shallow gulley a few hundred metres to the south-east, sergeant,' replied Scout Luthor. He pointed out the direction. 'It is less than two hundred metres from one of the camps, but it seems to curve southwards of them and there is not another camp within half a kilometre.'

Naaman's gaze followed the Scout's finger. He could not see much of the gulley that had been mentioned, but he could see two campfires, about fifty metres apart. Other than the dancing flames, which were growing weak, he could see little activity from the greenskins.

'That will be suitable,' he said with a nod. 'We will approach from the south, twenty metres dispersal. Follow me.'

Naaman led the way, rising out of the depression at a stoop, darting over the open ground with his bolt pistol ready. He spotted a flash of red to his left and turned his path south, ducking into the shadow of a monolithic boulder. Peering around the rock, he saw nothing between him and the gulley, which he could now see forming between two shallow, bush-strewn ridges. After another check on the position of the sentries, he set off at a comfortable run, crossing the few hundred metres to the head of the gulley without stopping. Flicking up his goggles, he drew out his monocular and examined the narrow split in the rocky hillside. Naaman could see nothing and waved the rest of the squad to take cover inside.

While Damas split the Scouts to their observation positions, Naaman crawled out of the shallow defile and wormed his way towards the closest ork camp.

The greenskins had chosen to spend the night near some grass-filled ruins. Naaman could not tell what the buildings had once been, but they were now overgrown with thorny branches, their walls toppled to form slopes and hillocks of broken brick. A rise to his right obscured one camp, the light of its fire creating a dim aura beyond the crest. To the left, looking between the hill and one of the ruins, Naaman could see another blaze. He watched the orks around the flames for a few seconds. Some were lying down, probably sleeping. Others sat on crates and upturned barrels or simply squatted in the grass. He counted seven in total. There was no way to tell if a similar number had gathered around the other fire, but it seemed unlikely there would be many more.

A handful of gretchin mooched around the ruins and the jutting rocks, kicking at stones, sometimes calling to each other in their squeaky voices. Naaman studied them for a while, trying to discern any pattern to their movements, but concluded that there was no regular rhythm or path to their patrols. The gretchin seemed reluctant to move away from the light of the fires, but now and then one of the orks would rouse itself and shout at the closest sentries, waving them further out.

The erratic behaviour of the picket was a problem. Although Naaman could see an obvious route to the north of the camps, passing through the leftmost ruins, it

would be too risky to use while there was any moonlight. By the time moonfall came, who could say where the gretchin would be? The Scouts' infiltration would have to be opportunistic and speedy.

Content that he was following the best course of action, Naaman slipped back to the others. He found them laying up at the lips of the gulley, Damas and two others keeping watch to the east, the other two Scouts watching to the south-east and north-west. Naaman stayed close to the head of the gulley and found a spot under the branches of a bush with low, twisted branches. From here he could see the left-most camp and the ruined building behind which the closest fire was burning low.

All they had to do now was wait for the moons to go down.

'Sergeant!'

Naaman glanced along the gulley, the whispered warning instantly breaking the trance-like state that had come over him during the watch. In the darkness he saw Luthor raise a hand and point to the camp next to the closest ruined building. Three small silhouettes emerged against the low orange glow of the fire, slowly walking straight for the gulley.

'Hold fire,' Damas whispered. The squad sergeant quietly slid sideways, towards Naaman. He stopped within reaching distance. 'What do you think? Should we eliminate them, brother?'

'Not yet,' Naaman replied, his words barely more than a breath. 'Let us wait to see what they do.'

Naaman checked the chronometer. It was twenty-seven minutes to total moonfall, though only one of the three remained in the sky and it was perhaps dark enough to move out. If the sentries changed course, they would wait for complete night. If not, Naaman would have a decision to make.

His breaths coming long and shallow, Naaman kept his eyes fixed firmly on the gretchin. There was a scattering of debris between the scrawny aliens and the lip of the gulley: crates, rusted pieces of old machinery and a small slag pile. Each of the sentries carried a rifle of some sort. They probably wouldn't do much damage if they hit, but the sound of gunfire would surely alert the nearby orks, which were a far more dangerous proposition than the gretchin.

The group kept on their course, heading towards the Scouts. They were about seventy metres away when they stopped and began to pick through the junk scattered around the slagheap. Naaman didn't like them being so close even though they were currently distracted. A rattle of a stone, the clink of a weapon

on rock or even a break in the cloud to let through more moonlight might attract the sentries' attention.

It was time to get moving again.

'Brother Damas,' Naaman whispered. 'Move your squad into the outskirts of the camp and eliminate those sentries. I'll swing around the north and make sure the flank is secure.'

'Confirm, brother,' said Damas. 'I'll have Luthor move in to cover the closest camp with his heavy bolter while we eliminate the gretchin.'

'Confirm,' replied Naaman. 'If the alarm is raised, concentrate your shooting on that camp. I will intercept any reinforcements coming through from the other fire.'

The two sergeants nodded to each other and parted. Naaman heard Damas's whispered commands and left the gulley, using the rise of the hill between the two ruined buildings to conceal his path northwards. Heading towards the farther of the two ruins, Naaman heard the *skritch-skritch-skritch* of footsteps on gravel. The veteran threw himself down on instinct, bolt pistol ready, eyes darting left and right, searching for the source of the noise. With his other hand, he tugged his cloak into position, covering himself from scalp to knees, peering under the rim of the hood.

Naaman saw the gretchin come around the corner of the building, a stout blunderbuss-like shotgun over its shoulder. He caught the strange, mouldy whiff of the greenskin as it sat down on a broken lump of masonry and pulled something from the pocket of its ragged jerkin. Something squirmed in its bony fingers before being popped into a fanged mouth. The sounds of loud chewing broke the stillness.

The gretchin was looking in Naaman's direction. He lay absolutely still, bolt pistol sighted on the creature's chest. Finishing its snack, the gretchin stood up and continued to wander on, passing a few metres in front of the prone Space Marine.

As soon as the gretchin had passed, Naaman surged to his feet, slipping his combat knife from his belt with his left hand. Two swift steps brought him up behind the creature. Hearing the quiet thud of Naaman's boots, the gretchin started to turn, but was far too slow. Naaman hooked his arm over the gretchin's shoulder and plunged the knife upwards into its throat, puncturing the windpipe. The sentry spasmed limply in Naaman's grasp, burbling blood as the Space Marine quickly sawed the knife out of the gretchin's throat, slicing through muscle and veins.

It fell limp in his grasp. Glancing around to assure himself he had not been seen, Naaman sheathed his knife and hefted the small creature under his arm. A few dozen strides brought him to the shelter of the ruin, where he laid the body down in a corner of the broken walls. Naaman passed through the roofless rooms until he came to the eastern side of the building. Crouched beneath the sill of a glassless window, he stopped again and watched the orks around the northern campfire.

As he waited, Naaman's attention was drawn to his right by a high-pitched wail, which suddenly fell silent. One of the gretchin had spotted the Scouts!

Suddenly the air was split by the thumping detonations of Luthor's heavy bolter. Naaman heard the shrieks of dying gretchin and the angry bellows of the orks. The greenskins in front of him roused slowly, startled by the sudden attack. There were more shouts and fire from the south where the orks ahead of Naaman grabbed their weapons and loped away from their camp.

Naaman unhooked his chainsword but did not start up the motor. His cloak flapping behind him, the sergeant vaulted through the window, heading directly for the campfire. The orks were completely unaware of his presence as they rushed to the aid of their companions. Less than twenty metres from the greenskins, Naaman opened fire. Silenced bolts ripped through the back of the rearmost ork, chewing through muscle and vertebrae. One of the other orks noticed its demise and swung around to see what had happened; by the time the creature looked in his direction Naaman was already in the shelter of a tall rock, cameleoline swathing his form. As soon as the ork's red eyes roved elsewhere, Naaman rose up and fired three bolts into the creature's face and chest, felling it instantly.

There were five more orks to deal with. Naaman broke from cover at a sprint, rushing up behind the greenskins as they lumbered towards the fighting at the other fire. Catching up with the orks, Naaman swung his chainsword at the neck of the closest, thumbing the starter mid-blow. Growling teeth sheared halfway into the ork's neck before jamming on its thick spinal column. With a grunt, Naaman wrenched the blade free and fired his bolt pistol into the back of the creature's head as it collapsed sideways.

Taken off guard by the deadly shadow charging into their midst, the orks were thrown into confusion. The pale rays of the moon shimmering from his cameleoline, Naaman ducked beneath the hasty swing of an axe and brought the throbbing chainsword up into the ork's gut, ramming it point first through the stomach and into the chest cavity. The creature shuddered with the vibrations of

the weapon, spittle flying from its thick lips.

A grunt of effort to Naaman's right warned him of imminent attack and he ducked as he pulled his chainsword free, a cleaver-like blade cutting the corner from the sergeant's swirling cloak. Naaman kicked the creature's legs from under it as he spun beneath the swinging weapon. A second ork leapt to the attack, a heavy, serrated sword aimed at Naaman. He smashed aside the blade with his chainsword; at the same time he fired a bolt into the face of the downed ork, its brains splashing out across the cracked stone underfoot.

The roar of the heavy bolter sounded closer and the ork with the serrated sword was hurled away from Naaman by multiple explosions across its chest and shoulders, ragged remains slapping into one of its companions. Naaman used the distraction to chop at the disorientated ork's arm, hacking the limb away below the shoulder. Out of instinct, the alien tried to throw a punch with the bloody stump. It stared at the ragged wound in amazement when the expected blow failed to appear. Naaman shattered its knee with a bolt and brought his sword down on its back as it fell forwards, hacking several times into the creature's green flesh until the spine finally snapped.

Having dealt with the other camp, Damas and his squad arrived, falling upon the orks with bolt pistol, chainsword and monomolecular-edged combat knives. Confused and partly blinded by the dark, the orks died swiftly, cut down in a few savage seconds.

After the clamour of battle, silence descended again, broken by the sighing of the wind and the crackle of the fires. The whole fight had taken less than twenty seconds, from the first cry of the sentry to the choking death-rattle of the last ork.

'Casualties?' Naaman demanded, glancing at the others.

'None, brother,' Damas replied. The sergeant turned to his squad with a proud smile. 'Not so much as a scratch. The advantage of surprise is the deadliest weapon in our arsenal.'

'That is good,' said Naaman.

He flicked blood from his chainsword and wiped the weapon clean on the jacket of a dead ork. He checked his chronometer. There were two and a half hours until dawn and still many kilometres to cover before they reached the ridge overlooking the geothermal station.

'Hide the bodies in the ruins, douse the fires,' Damas told his squad as Naaman pulled out his monocular and looked to the east. He could see a stretch of two or three kilometres up the slope before there were more campfires. They could

cover the next leg at a comfortable run.

'Belay that,' snapped Naaman. The Scouts dropped the ork bodies they had picked up and looked at him. 'By the time the orks find them, if they ever do, we'll be far away from here. We have to keep moving.'

'As you say,' said Damas, choosing not to argue the point. 'Let's get into our observation position before dawn.'

Reloading their weapons, checking their cloaks, the Scouts ghosted into the night.

Naaman kept the squad angling slightly to the south, avoiding the bulk of the camps ahead. Throughout the night Naaman could see mobs of greenskins and hear their vehicles, gathering north of the East Barrens station. For all their numbers, Naaman was surprised that there were not more greenskins. Certainly the forces he had seen advancing while he had retreated the day before had not been all accounted for by the assault on Koth Ridge. The orks were definitely on the move again, but it was impossible for Naaman to judge where they were heading.

The Scouts made good time, eating up the kilometres at a tireless half-run. Though the location of the ork camps had forced him further south than he had originally hoped, Naaman was pleased when they finally crested the ridge above the geothermal station. The plant itself was about a kilometre to the east.

Using the thermal setting of his monocular, Naaman examined the compound of buildings clustered around the angular bulk of the geothermal generator. He could see lots of heat, most of it coming from the plant itself, but there were also dozens if not hundreds of orks down there. He spent several minutes looking but could see nothing in range that looked remotely like a spaceship. Even further out into the Barrens, the plains stretched on without a break.

There was only one conclusion that sprang to Naaman's mind. Ork technology was unfathomable, often crudely made but highly effective. The only possible explanation for the absence of a landed ship would be that the orks had managed to hide it with some kind of camouflage field. It had to be here somewhere, Naaman reasoned: orks didn't simply pop out of thin air.

He hoped that dawn would literally shed more light on the answers and he ordered the squad to head northwards for a better view of the sprawling ork encampment at the base of the ridge. When they had found a good spot to observe the orks whilst keeping out of sight, the squad settled down to another tense time of waiting and keeping watch.

Slowly dawn's ruddy fingers gripped the eastern skies. Naaman waited expectantly, scouring the plains for some telltale shimmer or reflection that might betray the location of a shield-screened vessel. As the minutes skipped past, his anxiety to find the ship grew. In the growing light, he returned his attention to the power plant to see if more had been revealed of the orks' numbers and the layout of their defences.

The monocular almost fell from his fingers in surprise. Naaman stared dumbfounded at the ork encampment, lost for words.

'What is it?' asked Damas from behind Naaman, sensing the veteran sergeant's shock.

'By the Lion's shade, I've never seen anything like it,' exclaimed Naaman.

Still astounded by what he had seen, Naaman fumbled for the long-range comm handset and opened up the command frequency that would put him directly in touch with Master Belial. Raising the monocular he checked again to make sure he wasn't imagining what he had thought he had seen.

'This is Master Belial. Make your report, brother-sergeant.'

Naaman wasn't quite sure what his report was. How did he explain what he was looking at?

'Naaman? What is happening?'

'Sorry, brother-captain,' Naaman managed when he had mustered his thoughts. 'I know how the orks are getting to Piscina.'

# THE TALE OF NAAMAN

## REVELATIONS

It was Naaman's incredulity that made it so difficult to describe what he could see to Master Belial. Never before had the Scout-sergeant doubted the evidence of his own eyes, but as he stared through the monocular it was hard for him to comprehend what he was looking at.

'The orks have taken possession of the geothermal station,' he reported, choosing to concentrate on things that did not invite speculation. 'There are several hundred of them. Composition of the force is in line with what we have already encountered: mostly infantry and a few smaller vehicles and field pieces.

'The power plant has been adapted; I can see strange machinery and energy relays of ork design. The major alteration is the addition of a large disc, like a communications transmitter, although I can see energy waves crackling over its surface. There are sporadic bursts of energy that appear to be a result of the generator systems suffering from an overload of capacity.'

'Are they using it to supplement the power of their ship, brother?' asked Belial.

'There is no ship, brother-captain,' Naaman replied.

He looked again at the ork camp. No more than two hundred metres from the geothermal station was an upright disc of pure darkness, its edges crackling with energy. The surface of the disc had a strange oily sheen, glimmering with distorted reflections of the surrounding terrain. The disc oscillated, growing and shrinking by small increments that matched the erratic pulses of lightning flaring across the geothermal relays.

'I see some kind of energy screen, no more than five metres in diameter,' Naaman said. 'Wait, something is happening.'

The rim of the disc became a solid blaze of power while the generators of the power plant erupted with fountains of sparks and electricity. The haze around the

transmitter disc deepened into a greenish glow, shimmering upwards into the sky.

The disc blinked out of existence, leaving only the crackling halo of energy. Within its circumference it was if a window had been opened. Rather than the grasslands of the East Barrens, Naaman could see a dark hall, criss-crossed with metal beams receding into the distance. Colourful banners decorated with large glyphs hung from the ceiling, and what he could see of the walls were painted with more orkish designs.

He took all of this in at a glance but his attention was fixed upon the occupants of the hall. A sea of green faces leered out of the opening: thousands of orks clustered around more bikes and buggies, all swathed in the shadow of enormous war engines.

Orks poured towards the opening… and stepped through! A mob of a dozen greenskins emerged onto the Kadillus hillside, tendrils of green power lapping at them, flickering across the portal. As each alien passed through, the halo of energy flickered, dimming and then returning with less brilliance. When the thirteenth ork crossed the threshold the halo flared violently, sending blue and purple sparks cascading down onto the new arrivals. A companion detonation flared across the energy relay on the power plant. The haze from the disc also vanished. As instantly as it had disappeared, the black disc came back, closing the pathway.

'It's a teleporter!' Naaman announced. 'The orks are teleporting directly to the surface.'

'That cannot be correct,' replied Belial. 'Close orbital sweeps have revealed no ork ship in proximity to Piscina. Perhaps they are teleporting from their ship further out into the East Barrens?'

'That seems unlikely, brother-captain,' said Naaman. 'It appears the orks are siphoning off power from the geothermal plant, and it is definitely being sent starwards, not across the plains. The connection seems to be intermittent. I saw inside the ork base, or ship, or whatever it is. They have Titan-class war engines, but they have not brought them through. It seems that the teleporter is severely restricted at present.'

'This is highly speculative, brother-sergeant,' said Belial. 'I need confirmation and solid data for the Techmarines to analyse if we are to determine the exact nature of this device.'

'I understand, brother-captain. The orks are dispersing and moving westwards to a staging point on the other side of the ridge. It will be possible to get closer to

the power station and take energy readings.'

As Naaman watched, the portal burst into life once more, existing long enough for three buggies to race through before collapsing again.

'Consider that to be your mission, brother-sergeant,' said Belial. 'Take measurements of the energy levels, timing and reinforcement rate and report directly to me.'

'Confirm, brother-captain,' said Naaman. 'We will approach as swiftly as possible.'

Naaman severed the comm-link and turned to the Scouts.

'We have to get a lot closer,' he told them. 'Follow me.'

The squad carefully picked their way down the eastern side of the ridge, keeping at least a kilometre from the ork camp. The greenskins appeared to regard their position as safe behind the encampments further west and had posted no patrols or sentries that Naaman could see. Though the Scouts said nothing of the extraordinary sight of the ork teleporter, Naaman could sense their amazement, and an undercurrent of unease at the implications it presented.

For the moment, Naaman concentrated solely on approaching the geothermal station undetected. He could leap at guesses regarding the teleporter's function, but such speculation was pointless without solid facts to inform it. As they reached the level of the East Barrens plains, the veteran sergeant was sure of only one thing: the teleporter presented an unquantifiable threat to the defenders of Kadillus. If the orks were somehow able to sustain the portal and bring through their larger war machines, there was little the Dark Angels or Free Militia had to combat them. Naaman was pleased that Belial had possessed the foresight to send a warning to the Dark Angels Chapter, even if they only arrived in time to avenge the fallen of the 3rd Company.

A steady but slow flow of reinforcements continued to emerge from the portal. These freshly arrived orks pressed westwards to join the others, so Naaman led the squad on a circuitous routing, coming at the power plant from the north-west, almost behind the ork camp. The geothermal station covered a roughly square area half a kilometre wide on each side; the central power station dominated much of this, surrounded by small clusters of maintenance buildings and dilapidated monitoring installations. There was no sign of the tech-priests and several dozen men who had worked here before the orks' arrival; Naaman presumed that they were all dead, taken by surprise by the greenskins' arrival, however that had come about.

The slope of the ridge overlooked the whole compound, which was built across

three shallow hills. The portal occupied the crest of one hill, while another was crowned with a thick crop of trees, rocks and bushes, providing the perfect cover to approach. Naaman was grateful that dawn had been accompanied by a layer of thick, low cloud, increasing the early morning gloom.

Ever alert to the few orks wandering around the camp, the Scouts pressed closer, slipping into the concealing foliage of the nearby hill while Naaman took stock of the situation. Damas joined Naaman and both of them wriggled through the bushes to the southern slope of the hill, from where they could see more of the ork camp.

Naaman pulled out his auspex and set it for a wide-spectrum scan. Other than the energy spike from the power plant and the readings from the orks, the scanner provided no new information.

'We will have to close the range,' said Naaman, stowing the auspex.

'What about that outhouse just west of the plant?' suggested Damas, pointing to a half-ruined plascrete building twenty metres from the main generator complex.

Naaman considered the lay of the land. There was another building even closer to the generator, but the Scouts would have to cross a few metres of open ground in full view of the portal. The teleporter was active for only a few seconds at a time and took several minutes to recharge between each opening, but Naaman had been timing the power surges and there was no definite pattern. It was risky, but that position would allow him to scan not only the power plant but also the portal itself.

'We will close in on the plant first,' said Naaman, deciding that Damas's course of action presented the least risk of discovery, even though the Scouts would have to relocate to scan the portal. 'You will lead with the squad and I will follow you.'

Damas nodded and crawled back to the others. Naaman connected the long-range comm and hailed Belial. When the connection was made, it was marred by bursts of static, in rhythm with the pulsing of the energy across the power plant's transformers.

'This is Master Belial, make your report.'

'Initial readings confirm that a relay is being used to project the energy as a microwave beam, brother-captain,' said Naaman. 'I will obtain a more accurate energy signature for the *Unrelenting Fury* to trace so that we can locate its destination.'

'What about the ork build-up? How soon should we expect another attack?'

'I would say that the orks will be back to their previous strength in the next two

hours, perhaps a little more, brother-captain. May I make a suggestion?'

'Please do, brother-sergeant, your insight has proven very useful so far.'

'The teleporter is not directly connected to the power plant on the ground. Wherever it is coming from, the teleporter beam is being powered from the source rather than the destination. The orks' occupation of the power plant suggests that the teleporter cannot function on a sustainable basis on its own power; this is why Ghazghkull's first attack was infantry alone. If you were to bombard the power station and destroy the source of energy, the teleporter will cease to function.'

'Bombardment is an option of last resort, Naaman,' replied Belial heavily. 'The geothermal stations are located on the weakest fault lines of Kadillus, areas made more insecure by the boreholes from them driven into the island's heart. Brother Hephaestus warns me that any bombardment risks rupturing the Kadillus magma chamber, which in turn could precipitate a chain-reaction eruption, destroying the entire island.'

'I see,' Naaman said, ashamed that he had not thought through the consequences of blasting a power station that was, in essence, an artificial volcano. He was tired and rubbed his eyes. 'Would it be possible to conduct a tactical strike, brother-captain? If we can reclaim the power plant we can cut off the source of energy in a more controlled fashion.'

'The only available resources are myself and Deathwing Squad Adamanta. We can launch an attack, but we have no means of holding any ground. If it is possible to conduct a strike, you must locate a suitable target for us.'

'I understand, brother-captain. I will report again when I can furnish you with more accurate target information.'

'You are doing well, Naaman,' said Belial, surprising the sergeant. 'I realise that you have been under a great deal of pressure the last few days and that I have placed a considerable burden upon you. I have utter faith in your abilities and judgement, sergeant. Carry on with your mission.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. I aspire to the example of the Lion. We shall not fall short in our dedication.'

Buoyed up by Belial's words of encouragement, Naaman nodded for Damas to head out. Naaman cast a last glance at the portal and then followed the Scouts, bolt pistol in hand. They moved down the slope and paused within the shadows of a stand of stunted trees. With a burst of light, the portal opened and disgorged a pair of warbikes, which raced off westwards. Certain that the portal could not open for a few more minutes, Naaman signalled for the Scouts to break cover.

One at a time they darted from the trees, crossing a few metres of ground in a stooped run until they reached a patch of rocks and boulders almost directly north of the power plant. Naaman sprinted after them, casting glances to his right until he reached the shelter of the boulders. The sergeant activated the auspex again, but still the energy signal from the power relays was too weak to get an accurate fix on their alignment. They had to get even closer.

From here it was about twenty metres to the ruined outbuilding. Most of the upper storey had collapsed and Naaman could see the walls had been torn down by the orks and the reinforcing struts within the plascrete ripped out. The greenskins had used this material to erect crude gantries around the geothermal plant, criss-crossing the pylons and transformers with a maze of struts and ladders so that they could jury-rig their own cables and generators to the main relays.

With an idea germinating at the back of his mind, Naaman took the lead. Pulling up his cameleoline hood and wrapping his cloak tight, he dashed across the rubble-strewn ground to take cover in the ruined building. The *scrunch* of footfalls sounded the arrival of the others as he ghosted through the bare rooms. It was impossible to say what purpose the building had once served. The orks had stripped out every piece of machinery and furniture, leaving only the half-destroyed shell. Even the roof had been taken away, but the sun was not yet high enough to reach into the building's interior.

A plascrete staircase still stood, jutting up from the centre of the ruin. Naaman directed the others to take up covering positions before slithering up the steps, wrapped in his cloak. At the top, he lay as still as death, auspex in hand, peering at the power plant from under the lip of his hood. Orks paced haphazardly around the station, no more than ten of them that Naaman could see. Another burst of crackling energy heralded more reinforcements through the portal, but Naaman ignored them. There was no way the Scouts would be found unless the orks were going out of their way to look for them; the truth was the orks patrolling the plant seemed bored and were spending more time arguing and joking with each other than keeping watch. It was possible that a lone Scout might be able to get into the plant itself without the alarm being raised.

Naaman counted four more portal openings while he lay at the top of the steps, the auspex beeping quietly in his hand as it absorbed and analysed the energy waves emanating from the power plant. He was no Techmarine and the intricacies of the data were as unintelligible as the grunts and roars of the orks, but he could see a pattern.

The energy from the power plant was being beamed to some other point, building in intensity roughly a minute prior to the portal opening. Once the teleporter was activated, the power link spiked at a level five times the build-up and lasted for only a few seconds. It was clear that no matter how long the pre-teleportation process, the portal could not be opened for more than a few seconds. Why this might be the case was a mystery, but it did confirm Naaman's suspicion that without the power relay of the geothermal plant the teleporter could not be opened for any significant length of time. It required all of the plant's output to generate a single pulse of teleporter energy, and all that was required to disrupt the beam was the removal of one of the bastardised relays the orks had added to the power station.

Armed with this information, Naaman contacted Belial.

'Brother-captain, this is Sergeant Naaman. I will shortly be sending my collected data via the link. It is my belief that a small disruption to the power network of the plant will disrupt the entire operation. I will append monocular images of the relays for the examination of the Techmarines.'

'Report received, brother-sergeant,' replied Belial. 'Standing by to receive data transmission.'

Naaman hooked the auspex into the long-range comm and punched in the rune sequence to uplink the information the scanner had collated. He waited impatiently until the auspex chimed three times to indicate the upload was completed. Switching connectors, Naaman attached his monocular to the comm-piece and spent several minutes sweeping the plant area with the optical device, transmitting the images to his commander. When he was done, he packed away the monocular and auspex and waited for Belial and his advisors to formulate a plan.

The minutes crept past. Naaman retreated from the tip of the stairway and joined the others. The orks had shown no sign that they were aware of the Scouts' presence and Naaman felt relatively safe. He knew that such sanctuary was only temporary. If the Deathwing launched an attack it would stir up the orks, not only around the power station but also those westwards on the ridge.

There would be no way to get back to Koth Ridge, as Naaman had known since setting out. He called the Scouts together to make an announcement.

'The time is fast approaching when we will be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Chapter,' he said. He was pleased to see that none of the Scouts showed any sign of fear or surprise. 'We have used stealth as a weapon and it has

served us well, but there comes a time when stealth is no longer enough and pure force must prevail. We will not live to see the success of our mission today, for the consequences of our actions will not be measurable in moments but in hours and days.'

He looked at them in turn and saw nothing but determination and pride. Damas spoke next.

'We will demonstrate the most fundamental power of the Astartes,' said the sergeant, glancing at Naaman before continuing. 'All of your training, all of our secrecy and circumspection is but a preliminary to one simple purpose: the destruction of the Emperor's enemies. Though our mission shall succeed and our part in the greater campaign will come to an end, it still remains our duty to slay as many of the foe as is possible. We will fight to our last breath and even then we will fight until death claims us. We are all Space Marines, inheritors of the Lion's legacy, upholders of the Imperial Will.'

The comm-chime attracted Naaman's attention.

'Sergeant Naaman, this is Master Belial. We have analysed the data and discerned a weakness in the enemy structure. The orks' teleporter beam is interfering with our own lock-on signal. The orks are still in possession of the defence-laser silo and the *Unrelenting Fury* can only make a quick pass. Estimated window of operation is less than five minutes. For these reasons, you must place the teleport homer as close to the objective as you can. Is that possible?'

Naaman looked out of the window at the orks scattered around the power plant.

'Affirmative, brother-captain,' he said. 'I can have you teleported directly into the power station precinct.'

'Good,' said Belial. 'We are ready to commence the operation as soon as we receive the lock-on signal from you. Energy interference prevents teleporter lock on your squad. We will not be able to extract you.'

'We are aware of that factor, brother-captain. Squad Damas and I will provide a diversionary attack to ensure minimal resistance to your arrival. We are honoured to serve.'

'You will be remembered, Brother Naaman. You and your warriors are an inspiration to us all.'

The link went silent. Naaman unslung the comm-unit and set it to one side. He did not need it any more. He looked at the Scouts and saw that they had been listening to his part of the conversation. Standing up, they formed a circle, weapons raised in salute to each other, brothers in battle.

‘Fight hard, fight long,’ said Naaman. ‘No surrender, no retreat. We are Astartes, the bane of the heretic, the mutant and the alien. We are the Dark Angels, the first and the greatest. Honour our battle-brothers and cherish the opportunity for sacrifice.’

‘What is the plan, Naaman?’ asked Damas.

‘I have a teleport homer. On my signal you will open fire. In the resulting confusion I will infiltrate the power-plant complex and place the beacon. Master Belial and Squad Adamanta will insert by teleporter, disable or dismantle the energy relays and teleport back to orbit. We will remain to inflict as many casualties as possible. There will be no withdrawal.’

‘Understood, brother,’ said Damas. The sergeant pulled free his chainsword. ‘Purge the alien.’

‘Purge the alien,’ the Scouts quietly chorused in reply.

‘For the Lion,’ whispered Naaman, heading towards the door.

The veteran sergeant broke from the building at a run, bolt pistol in one hand, teleporter beacon in the other. He moved as fast as possible, heading directly for the closest generator housing. An ork strutted across a walkway above. The greenskin stopped as it caught sight of Naaman. It started to raise its gun. A moment later, the sergeant’s shot caught it in the throat, hurling it over the railing to plummet to the hard ground. Naaman heard startled grunts from the other orks around the power plant.

‘*Bellicus extremis*,’ he growled over the comm. ‘Open fire!’

Naaman rounded the corner of the generator and came face-to-face with a startled ork coming the other way. The Scout-sergeant fired twice, putting two bolt-rounds into the creature’s gnarled face. He was about twenty metres from the optimal spot for the beacon. Jumping over the fallen ork, he headed straight on while the station echoed with the snap of bolter rounds from the Scouts and the crackle of the orks’ primitive guns.

The sergeant could smell ozone in the air and feel the building energy on his skin. A fork of lightning leapt across the relays above, heralding another portal opening and sending a tingle of static across the sergeant’s flesh. Bare cables and bundles of wires hung like bunting between the generator blocks and the ground throbbed underfoot from the geothermal reactors hundreds of metres below.

Feeling the thrum of the power lines, Naaman realised that the place he had chosen was too close to the main transmitter: there was a chance the teleporter signal would be fractured by interference from the orks’ energy relays.

He cut to his left through a crumbling archway looking for an open space and

was confronted by half a dozen orks dressed in red flak jackets, with grinning suns painted on their faces. The orks were intent on reaching the Scouts and did not see him as he ducked back into the archway. He crouched in the shadow with his pistol ready and peered around the corner to see the front three orks shredded by a hail of heavy bolter rounds.

'Good aim, Luthor,' Naaman said over the comm. 'Keep up your fire!'

The orks scurried for cover as more heavy bolter fire screamed into the power plant, severing wires and ripping small craters into the generator housings. Naaman dashed from the archway, bolt pistol blazing to cut down an ork sheltering behind an angled girder. Bullets whined in the sergeant's direction as he reached the cover of a pillar, rockcrete shards spraying around him. A glance at the portal hill revealed more orks hurrying towards the power plant, their padded vests and armour plates decorated with red and black checks. The orks wielded stubby pistols and cleavers, their fanged mouths wide as they bellowed encouragement or warnings to the other greenskins.

Naaman holstered his pistol and keyed in the activation sequence of the teleport homer. More and more bullets converged on his hiding place as the device shed its outer sheath. With a series of growls and clicks, transmitter vanes opened up, splaying from the tip of the beacon.

With a benediction to the Emperor in mind, Naaman broke cover and dashed across the dusty ground just to the south of the power plant. The black-clad orks were less than fifty metres away as Naaman speared the teleport homer into the dirt and leapt back. A bullet caught him on the arm, ripping through his sleeve to carve a furrow across his bicep. He knew he had to distract the orks from the beacon and sprinted to his left, firing his pistol as he did so. Behind him the teleport homer opened fully and sent its silent, invisible signal.

Naaman dived through the leaves of a bush as more bullets kicked up puffs of dust around him. Rolling to his left, he came up on one knee and sighted on the closest ork. Three bolt-rounds punched through the alien's jacket with spurts of dark blood, toppling the creature. The orks returned fire, howling faces bathed in the flare of their pistols.

In the storm of fire, another ork bullet found its mark, catching Naaman in the thigh. Grunting, he shot back, finger hammering the trigger of his bolt pistol to send a salvo of bolts into the orks. Two of the beasts tumbled into the dirt but the survivors were now less than twenty metres away.

Then Naaman felt something: his highly attuned senses detected a slight increase in air pressure, like the bow-wave of an aircraft. Miniature dust devils

writhed across the dusty ground and the air swirled into a haze.

In a blistering ball of blue light, the Deathwing arrived with a thunderous crack. Five hulking armoured suits appeared between Naaman and the onrushing orks. The Terminators opened fire immediately, their storm bolters scything through the remaining orks in a couple of seconds.

In the glare of muzzle flare stood Captain Belial, Master of the 3rd Company. His shoulder pads displayed the heraldry of the Chapter and the skull device of a veteran, the white robe of a Deathwing warrior hanging from his shoulders. He fired a storm bolter with his right hand, a crackling power sword in the left.

Surrounded by the five heavily armoured Space Marines, Master Belial waved the squad forwards with his glittering power sword. Ahead of them the ork portal pulsed again and another stream of greenskins surged through onto Kadillus. Meanwhile, Naaman could hear shooting coming from the ridge. The orks to the west were alert to the attack and were turning back to the power plant.

Reloading his pistol, Naaman ran through the power station, heading back towards the Scouts. To his left Belial and Squad Adamanta plunged into the heart of the transformers and generators, heading for the ork power relays that were transmitting energy from the geothermal station. Pulses from weapons screamed down from the ridge above the heads of a sea of greenskins. The Deathwing moved out of sight as Naaman emerged from the power plant. Ahead of him, the Scouts kept up a constant stream of bolter and heavy bolter fire from the ruined building, gunning down the orks that had emerged from the teleporter opening.

Naaman sprinted back though the door to rejoin the squad. Looking through a window, he saw the Deathwing forming an armoured cordon around Belial as the company commander pulled himself up a ladder below one of the ramshackle ork relay discs. Broken cables hurled sparks around the Terminators as they launched a steady barrage of fire at the incoming greenskins. Belial reached a gantry above them and crossed over to one of the generator housings. Bullets skipped up from the rockcrete casing under his feet, cut ragged holes in his bone-coloured robe and scored grey welts across the dark green of his armour.

‘Enemy to the south!’ warned Damas, shifting his position at one of the windows.

Naaman turned his attention to the approaching orks for a moment, but they were still out of range of his pistol. He pulled free his chainsword and tested the motor. Razor-sharp teeth whirred with a satisfying growl.

Out of the corner of his eye, Naaman saw the ork portal expanding into life

again, revealing the tide of waiting greenskins. After only a moment, the opening shuddered and the black disc returned, shrinking to half its size. Belial stood triumphantly atop the power plant, a piece of ork equipment in one hand, ripped from its makeshift housing. Without the relay, the generators no longer buzzed with electricity and the flare of energy along the cables had died to a trickle.

'Squad Damas, honour your commander!' Damas barked over the comm. The Scouts turned and raised their weapons in honour of Belial. The master returned the salute, lifting his glittering power sword towards the Scouts.

More blue energy swirled through the power plant, engulfing the master and his Terminators with its glow. They were swallowed up by the roiling ball of the teleporter field and faded from view. The light dimmed leaving only empty air where the Deathwing and Belial had been.

The Scouts were alone. As it always was, Naaman thought, and as it should be.

'Mission accomplished,' he quietly announced.

Enraged by the damage done to their teleporter, the orks converged on the Scouts. The walls of the ruined building exploded with bullet impacts and the detonations of rockets. Forced back from the western wall by the weight of fire, the Scouts followed Damas into the next room while Naaman once more sprinted up the crumbling stairway to gauge the enemy positions.

A swarm of gretchin were running down the ridge, driven on by the lash of their ork overseer. Behind them came several squads of infantry wielding a variety of guns, pistols, brutal clubs and jagged blades. From the direction of the portal, another mob of orks had taken up a firing position in a cluster of shallow rocks. They opened fire with their strange heavy weapons, rattling off blasts of green energy and fist-sized shells that ripped holes through the thin walls protecting the Scouts.

With a cry of pain, one of the Scouts was hurled back as a green bolt of energy screamed into a window, through the internal door and struck him in the shoulder. Bloodied and burnt, the Scout dragged himself to the doorway, fumbling with his bolter as more bullets whined into the building. He fired once in reply before a ricocheting bullet took him in the cheek and killed him.

Naaman leapt down the steps and snatched up the fallen Scout's bolter. As more blasts of energy exploded against the window frame, the veteran sergeant vaulted through another opening, determined not to be caught.

He stormed through the ork fusillade, large-calibre rounds whipping past,

ignoring the ravening balls of energy flying by, and reached the cover of another ruined outhouse. Ducking inside, he found himself in what seemed to be an old store, the walls lined with broken shelves, the floor littered with crates broken open by the orks. Naaman hauled himself up a metal rack to a slit window near the ceiling. Smashing out the pane of glass with the butt of the bolter, he brought up the weapon and fired at the orks close to the portal, his salvo ripping up a hail of rock shards from the orks' cover and punching into green flesh.

The blossom of a detonation behind Naaman's right attracted his attention. Glancing over his shoulder he saw through another window an ork Dreadnought clanking towards the Scouts' defensive position. It was twice as tall as the Space Marines, a massive armoured can on stunted legs with four mechanical arms; two ended in crackling power claws, one a rocket launcher fed by a hanging belt-feed, the fourth a broad-muzzled flamethrower that dribbled burning fuel into the grass at the Dreadnought's metal feet. Naaman could see the ripple of bolt detonations across the walker's armour but it advanced into the teeth of the Scouts' fire, impervious to their weapons. Another rocket corkscrewed from its launcher and exploded inside the Scouts' position.

'Status report!' Naaman barked into the comm.

A few moments passed before Damas replied.

'Just me and Luthor, brother. Withdrawing from this position.'

The Dreadnought was almost at the building. Naaman could see nothing of the Scouts inside. Barely a heartbeat after Damas finished speaking, the Dreadnought's flamethrower roared into life, a billow of black and yellow filling the ruins where the Scouts were sheltering.

'Damas?'

The comm stayed silent, while the pop of exploding bolt-rounds and the crackle of flames echoed around Naaman.

'Damas? Luthor?'

There was no reply. Naaman was the only Dark Angel alive on the East Barrens.

He had no time to mourn the loss of his battle-brothers or ponder the fortunes of war. The sergeant heard the crunch of a booted foot and the crash of a door falling from its hinges. Dropping to the floor, Naaman slung the bolter and drew out his chainsword and pistol again.

The first ork to enter the storeroom was met by the teeth of the sergeant's chainsword, chopping into its face to slice through eyes and brain. Naaman fired his pistol into the chest of the next, the explosive bolts throwing it back into the

ork behind. Naaman hacked the arm from a third before driving the point of the chainsword into its throat. As he parried a cleaver swinging at his gut, Naaman could feel a heavy thud shaking the ground. He spared it no mind and swung his chainsword low, hacking through the knee of the next ork to appear. As the creature tumbled, the Scout-sergeant fired two rounds into the back of its head, obliterating its skull.

In a cloud of dust and bricks, the ork Dreadnought crashed through the wall to Naaman's right. In an instant the sergeant saw the flicker of the flamethrower's igniter growing brighter. He leapt towards the war machine and rolled against the remains of the wall as a sheet of fire engulfed the store room, setting fire to wooden shelves and bathing the orks with its burning fury.

Looking up, Naaman saw a fanged face had been bolted to the front of the Dreadnought, made from jagged pieces of metal. The eyes were open slits, through which he could see the red of the pilot's own eyes. Naaman raised his pistol to find a shot but the Dreadnought swung at him with a clawed arm, pneumatics hissing, pistons buzzing. The claw missed but the arm caught the sergeant on the shoulder, hurling him into the wall. By instinct he blazed with his pistol, the bolts ricocheting from the Dreadnought's armour, the small detonations leaving scorch marks across the yellow and red paintwork.

The Dreadnought lifted a claw as Naaman's bolt pistol clicked empty. Without thought, Naaman raised his chainsword to ward away the blow. The claw cleaved down, smashing the sergeant's weapon to pieces and severing his hand. Blood spurted from the ruin of Naaman's wrist. With his right hand, he snatched something from his belt and held it in his palm.

Staring at the Dreadnought, knowing what he had to do, there was no room for regret or fear in the sergeant's thoughts. He had sworn an oath to protect the Emperor and his servants, and if that meant giving his life, so be it. There were others that would continue the fight.

'Remember me, Tauno,' Naaman whispered, activating the melta-bomb's magnetic clamp.

He slammed the anti-tank grenade into the fake face of the Dreadnought and pushed himself away. Through the pilot's eye slits, Naaman saw the ork within stare in amazement at the blinking red rune of the melta-bomb. A second later the grenade detonated, punching through the armour of the Dreadnought with a focussed fusion blast. The driver's head was incinerated in an instant. A moment later, the Dreadnought's engine exploded, tearing Naaman to pieces with white-hot fire and serrated fragments of metal.

Veteran Sergeant Naaman of the Dark Angels died without fear or regret. His last thoughts were of an unremarkable man he had sworn to protect with his life.

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## BATTLE AT BARRAK GORGE

The roar of the Thunderhawk's engines and the drone of the wind forced Chaplain Boreas to cut the external sound feed to his helmet as he listened to the company-wide broadcast from Master Belial.

'Through the diligence of Sergeant Naaman of the 10th Company and the industry and bravery of the Scouts and Ravenwing, we are now more aware of the threat to Piscina posed by the orks. The actions of our courageous battle-brothers have not only furnished us with this information, they have struck a blow against the greenskin menace that grants us the time to respond.

'It is my intention that Sergeant Naaman be lauded as a Hero of the Dark Angels when we rejoin with the rest of the Chapter. Even now Sergeant Naaman once more dares the ork lines to bring the bright light of truth upon the enemy's dark machinations. Until Brother Naaman reports fully, we must assume that the orks will attempt another attack on Koth Ridge with fresh forces. Be vigilant and unstinting in your destruction of the enemy.'

Boreas muttered his own praise to the heroic Naaman, head bowed. Around him the Space Marines of Squad Zaltys did likewise. A tone signalled a change of comm frequency in Boreas's ear. He adjusted the Thunderhawk's unit for the incoming transmission.

'Master Belial to Brother Boreas: stand ready to receive orders. A portion of the orks' strategy has been revealed to us. It is plain that they possess part of the Kadillus power network and we must assume it is with some as-yet-unknown reason. To what end, Sergeant Naaman is still investigating. However, if the orks desire to hold the East Barrens geothermal station we can be sure it is for some purpose that we should disrupt. It is clear to me now that it is no coincidence that Ghazghkull still controls the Kadillus Harbour power station, but there is a

means by which we can neutralise its power output.

'Your pilot is being sent coordinates of a relay station linking Kadillus Harbour to the East Barrens grid. Take possession of the relay and sever the link. Intelligence at this moment suggests the enemy have a weak guard at its location. After completion of this mission, transfer to Barrak Gorge to protect the power plant at the abandoned mine head. Other forces are being despatched to provide protection at several more locations.'

'Understood, brother-captain,' replied Boreas. 'What are your assessments of the available forces and enemy threat in the area?'

'Two companies of Piscina defence troops are already en route to Barrak Gorge overland. Take command on your arrival and ensure the station does not fall into the orks' hands. A Ravenwing land speeder will be despatched to provide reconnaissance and Sergeant Zaltys will accompany you with his squad.'

There was a pause in the transmission. Boreas glanced across the command deck to the pilot, Brother Demensuis.

'Have you received the mission target coordinates, brother?'

'Affirmative, Brother-Chaplain,' said Demensuis. 'Objective is twenty-three kilometres from our current position.'

'Belial to Boreas. It is my conclusion that following the success of the first phase of your mission, the orks will again attempt a breakthrough of Koth Ridge to link up with Ghazghkull's forces in the city. Estimate of threat to Barrak Gorge is minimal.'

'Understood, brother-captain. Have you received any notification from the rest of the Chapter?'

'Affirmative. Grand Master Azrael has informed me that the fleet is redirecting back from the jump point. We have been fortunate: the rest of our battle-brothers were only six hours from warp jump. They are heading in-system again at this time. It is my intention to curtail the ork threat until their arrival and then wipe them from Kadillus with the aid of the other companies. It is imperative the ork forces remain divided and that they are denied the energy supply they seem to be seeking.'

'I understand, brother. We will cage these beasts and exterminate them. Praise the Lion and honour the Emperor.'

'For the glory of lost Caliban,' said Belial before the link went dead.

Boreas hung the handset on the console and turned to the ten Space Marines sitting along the benches lining the Thunderhawk's main compartment.

'We have a seize-and-secure mission, brothers,' the Chaplain told them. 'Expect

light resistance. Suggestions for a plan of attack, brother-sergeant?'

Zaltys pulled down a hinged digital display from overhead and studied the schematic of the objective for a moment. He smiled at Boreas.

'Gunship attack run followed by direct aerial insertion by jump pack, Brother-Chaplain.'

'Very well, sergeant,' Boreas said with a nod. 'Prepare your squad. I will provide observation and coordination from the command deck.'

'Two minutes until we are on-site at the objective, brothers,' Demensuis announced. 'Approach at fifty metres for attack run and aerial deployment. Weapon systems set to machine-spirit control. Praise the unthinking mind that brings the ruin of our enemies.'

While Boreas returned to his position on the command deck, Zaltys and his warriors readied themselves for the assault. The squad geared themselves with bolt pistols, plasma pistols, chainswords, power swords and grenades from the weapons lockers; the sergeant replaced his regular armoured gauntlet with a bulky power fist and took a hand flamer from the underfoot storage bay. Armed, they helped each other into their assault harnesses, attaching the large turbo-fan jump packs to the spinal interfaces of their armour. The hull reverberated with the whine of the fans as each Space Marine tested his pack.

'Thirty seconds until attack run commences,' warned Demensuis. 'Swift shall be our anger, deadly shall be our strike.'

The lights inside the Thunderhawk dimmed to a dull red. In front of Boreas, the armoured canopy darkened to grey. In the distance he could see the squat structure of the energy relay post. Automatic surveyors were sweeping the ground ahead of the diving Thunderhawk. Red reticules sprang up in the cockpit display, hovering over detected foes. Boreas counted twenty-eight.

Flashes of gunfire sparkled from the relay post's roof as the orks opened fire on the incoming gunship. Bullets whizzed past and bounced harmlessly from the armourplas windshield.

'Machine-spirits awakened. Targets set. Commencing attack run.'

'Faith is our shield, righteousness our sword!' declared Boreas as the Thunderhawk echoed with the whine of powering weapon systems.

The gunship shuddered as the dorsal battle cannon opened fire, sending a shell directly into the roof of the relay building. The explosion sent bodies and rockcrete shards flying a hundred metres into the air.

At another command, two hellstrike missiles roared away from the gunship's wings on burning trails. The missiles jinked and swerved, their artificial brains

tracking the orks as they fled in all directions seeking cover. The first detonated a few dozen metres short of the compound, turning a buggy into flaming debris. The second banked left, following a group of orks heading for an irrigation ditch. It exploded as they reached cover, tossing their bodies across the grassland.

The battle cannon fired again as heavy bolters added their fury to the onslaught, stitching lines of detonations across the rockcrete ground of the compound. The battle cannon shell smashed into a small metal-roofed guardhouse, blowing it apart from the inside.

Heavy bolters swivelling to keep track of the dispersing orks, the Thunderhawk roared over the relay station.

'Prepare for disembarkation,' said Demensuis. 'Brace for deployment manoeuvre.'

The pilot cut the main plasma engines and hit the retro-jets. Inertia dragged Boreas sideways as the Thunderhawk rapidly slowed and banked heavily to the left, heavy bolters still firing at targets on the ground. Daylight flooded the main compartment as the prow assault ramp dropped down.

'Launch assault!' cried Zaltys. 'Show no mercy!'

The Assault Marines bounded down the ramp, jump packs flaring. In pairs they threw themselves from the gunship's open prow. Boreas tracked their descent on the external pict-feeds, watching the ten Space Marines plunge to the ground, their jump packs slowing their descent. With impacts that would have shattered the bones of lesser warriors, Zaltys's squad landed in the compound, ferrocrete cracking beneath their booted feet. The Assault Marines opened fire immediately, gunning down survivors from the gunship's attack.

'Taking up support circuit,' Demensuis said as the assault ramp whined shut and the plasma engines roared back into life.

The whole attack run and deployment had taken thirty-five seconds.

'Switch battle cannon control to my station, brother,' Boreas told the pilot.

The screens in front of the Chaplain changed, showing him the view from the Thunderhawk's main weapon system. A smaller display to the right contained a thermal scan of the area, the hot bodies of the orks showing up bright white against the fuzzy grey of the ground; to the left another screen contained a wireframe topographical display of the compound and the contours of the surrounding grassland.

'Combat squad split, brother-sergeant,' Boreas told Zaltys, analysing the data on the screens. 'Priority objectives: enemy field gun emplaced three hundred

metres south of the compound gate; twenty-plus infantry using the cover of a pipeline one hundred and fifty metres south-east.'

'Confirm, Brother-Chaplain,' replied Zaltys. 'Suppression fire required to cover advance.'

'Confirm, brother-sergeant,' said Boreas.

Boreas's gauntleted fingers danced over the sturdy keys of the control panel, locking the battle cannon's aim on the long-barrelled artillery piece the orks had hidden alongside the road to the relay station. They had heaped up mounds of earth as a basic emplacement, the muzzle of their weapon poking out from a covering of branches and leaves. Had the Dark Angels approached on the ground, the gun would have taken a significant toll.

The Chaplain pressed the fire rune and the gunship shuddered from the recoil. On the display, the emplacement was engulfed with a cloud of fire and dirt. Although the explosion was ferocious, the shot had only damaged the earthworks protecting the field gun. Despite the lack of direct damage, Boreas had done what was required: Zaltys and half of his squad were already halfway down the road, bounding towards the ork position with long leaps powered by their jump packs.

Boreas switched the pict-feed as the gunship circled around the compound. The other combat squad was already fighting with the ork infantry to the south-east, exchanging pistol fire as they closed in. The Chaplain watched as the orks surged out of their cover to meet the Assault Marines head-on. Boreas knew that it was crude instinct rather than bravery that had spurred the orks to make the counter-attack, their hunger for fighting overwhelming whatever rudiments of common sense the greenskins might possess. The result was inevitable as the Space Marines fell upon their foes with pistols and blades, cutting them down in a few seconds of frenzied activity.

'Heat signal detected to the north-west, brothers,' said Demensuis. 'Incoming ork transports.'

Boreas changed the view again and saw two open-backed trucks speeding through the high grass from a rough camp half a kilometre from the relay post. The Chaplain heard the distinctive thump of melta-bombs over the comm.

'Ork gun destroyed,' Zaltys reported. 'Advancing to relay building.'

'Switch controls to anti-personnel array,' Boreas said to Demensuis. 'Bring us in over those transports.'

While the pilot turned the Thunderhawk with his right hand, his left activated the manual controls of the gunship's four twin-linked heavy bolters. The main

view in front of Boreas changed again, a targeting matrix reticule dancing across the undulations of the ground below.

'Reducing speed for strafing run,' announced Demensuis.

The Thunderhawk tilted to the right for a few seconds and straightened, bringing it onto a course heading directly towards the approaching transports.

'Opening fire,' said Boreas as he locked the heavy bolter's tracking sights on the lead truck.

Flares of dozens of bolts burned through the air, the fire of eight heavy bolters converging on the ork transport. Tyres burst and the engine exploded, sending the vehicle's bonnet crashing through its low windshield, while the torrent of bolts tore along the truck's length, into the open back of the vehicle, gunning down the orks on board. The front axle snapped, turning the crashing truck's momentum into a somersault that sent it tumbling down a slope trailing burning shrapnel and oil.

'Target destroyed,' Boreas said calmly. '*Terminus excelsis*.'

The following truck veered wildly to its left, bumping over a low ridge of ground as Boreas's next salvo ripped furrows through the soil of Kadillus. The transport turned sharply again as Boreas adjusted his line of fire, the sudden change of direction sending two of the orks aboard spinning over the side. Next to the driver, the gunner angled his gun up towards the Thunderhawk, bullets spraying wildly past the gunship.

'Bring us over the transport, ten metres clearance,' Boreas told his pilot.

'Affirmative, Brother-Chaplain,' replied Demensuis.

Boreas lifted himself from his seat and headed back into the main bay as Demensuis wrestled at the controls, matching the erratic evasion moves of the driver below. Swaying to compensate for the dipping and turning of the gunship, the Chaplain strode out onto the assault ramp and hit the activation rune.

'Brother-Chaplain?' Demensuis's voice was shocked.

'Keep us level, increase speed by five per cent,' Boreas said, ignoring his battle-brother's concern. As the ramp opened the wind whistled into the Thunderhawk and set Boreas's robe madly flapping. The ground screamed past just a few metres below him, while ahead the ork truck swerved again in its attempt to outrun the Space Marines.

'Three degrees starboard, move to intercept.'

'Affirm, Brother-Chaplain.'

The view lurched again as Demensuis made the necessary adjustment.

The Thunderhawk was closing quickly on the ork vehicle. The driver had

abandoned any attempt to get to the relay compound and was now simply trying to elude the massive gunship roaring down upon them. The gunner could not swivel its weapon to bear and so pulled a pistol from its armoured cabin and began to fire at the aircraft in futile defiance.

Plasma jets roaring, the Thunderhawk swooped over the truck. Snatching his crozius from his belt, Boreas leapt from the ramp. The Chaplain plummeted the few metres to the truck, arms braced across his chest. His armoured boots impacted with the truck's engine block, smashing the front of the vehicle into the ground. The transport flipped over, tossing the orks in all directions as Boreas was flung along the ground, his backpack carving a wide furrow through the soft dirt.

After twenty or thirty metres, Boreas and the truck came to a stop. Checking his suit's systems and finding them to be operating at acceptable levels, the Chaplain stood up, throwing aside the wreckage of the truck. Around him, dazed orks were pushing themselves to their feet. Choosing to conserve ammunition in case he needed it at Barrak Gorge, Boreas sprinted into the orks, smashing them from their feet with the blazing head of his crozius. Two of the stunned greenskins mustered enough sense to put up a fight, but were no match for the Chaplain. He broke their limbs and dashed in their skulls without hesitation. Others were crushed beneath his boots as they lay wounded and growling in the grass.

'Do you wish to embark, brother?' Demensuis asked as the gunship slowed and circled above the Chaplain.

Boreas guessed the distance to the relay to be less than a kilometre.

'Negative, brother,' he replied. 'Land at the compound. Help Sergeant Zaltys unload the phase-field generator from the heavy equipment store. We will need it to access the subterranean cables beneath the relay station.'

'Affirmative, brother. Enjoy the walk.'

Boreas was about to rebuke Demensuis for his facetiousness but stopped himself before he said anything. The Chaplain looked at the broken ork bodies and the smoking wreck of the truck and wondered why he had chosen such a direct approach rather than continue engaging the enemy with the heavy bolters. It seemed that Demensuis was not the only victim of unnecessary exuberance at the moment. Naaman's exploits had been a glorious example to all of the Space Marines, challenging them to match his heroic feat.

The walk back to the compound would give Boreas some time to calm down and contemplate his foolhardy action.

The jets of the Thunderhawk kicked up a swirl of dust across the compound as the gunship lifted into the air. Boreas checked the chronometer display: three and a half minutes until detonation. Using the phase-field generator, Demensuis had burrowed a hole beneath the generator bunker and placed a fusion charge on the cables linking the East Barrens to Kadillus Harbour. If the Techmarine's assumptions were correct, this would simply sever the link without feedback through the whole grid.

The bewildering plethora of gauges and pipes, consoles and switchboxes had been utterly alien to Boreas, but he had faith in Demensuis's abilities. While Boreas had learned the *Calibanite Legacy* and the *Hymnals of Fortitude*, Demensuis had studied the mysteries of the Machine and the ways to appease its spirit.

The Chaplain looked out of the canopy at the receding ground. Faith in Demensuis was one thing, but it did little to quell Boreas's unease at dealing with consequences he did not fully comprehend.

'Everything will proceed as planned, brother,' Demensuis assured him, perhaps sensing the Chaplain's slight apprehension.

'What is the worst-case result?' asked Boreas, eyes fixed on the small rockcrete block housing the relay controls.

'That depends on the criteria you use,' replied Demensuis. 'In terms of the mission's aims, the worst case would be the link is not severed and the orks are able to continue with whatever it is they need the power supply for. In a wider context, it could be that I have made the grossest miscalculation and the whole island will explode in one massive volcanic eruption, shattering tectonic plates and sending tidal waves that will scour all life from the other islands, thereby effectively destroying Piscina as an Imperial world.'

Boreas glanced sharply at Demensuis, worried by his matter-of-fact tone.

'Could that really happen, brother?' the Chaplain asked. 'Could we destroy the planet?'

Demensuis kept his gaze forwards and his voice level.

'It is a theoretical possibility, brother, but highly improbable,' replied the Techmarine.

'How improbable?'

Demensuis turned his head slowly to look at Boreas, a thin smile on his lips.

'At least one in forty-eight million, I would say.'

The Chaplain grunted in annoyance at Demensuis's levity and turned his attention back to the chronometer. Twenty seconds to detonation.

‘This could be your last chance to say goodbye to the Third Company, Brother-Chaplain,’ Demensuis continued. ‘Any last words for them?’

‘I find this attitude highly disrespectful! Your irreverence is unbecoming of a battle-brother. I feel that when this campaign is complete, it would be beneficial to all of us that you spend more time in the Reclusiam than the armoury. These consta–’

Boreas stopped as a bluish sphere of gas and fire engulfed the relay station. Electricity crackled through the expanding ball of plasma. Parts of the compound collapsed as cracks ripped through the rockcrete-covered ground. A few seconds passed before the shockwave hit the Thunderhawk, setting every surface rattling, jarring Boreas against his seat harness.

Demensuis leaned forwards and pointedly looked around through the Thunderhawk’s canopy at the ground below, before his gaze settled on Boreas.

‘It seems my calculations were correct, brother,’ said the Techmarine. ‘Sorry to interrupt. You were saying something about spending more time in the Reclusiam, I believe.’

‘We *will* speak further on this when we return to the Chapter,’ Boreas warned. ‘Please restrain your glibness in future.’

Demensuis bowed his head in apology and steered the Thunderhawk northwards.

‘Journey time to Barrak Gorge estimated at seventy-six minutes, Brother-Chaplain,’ he said. ‘Do you wish to apprise Master Belial of our successful mission, or shall I?’

Boreas snatched the comm handset from its cradle.

‘This is Chaplain Boreas to Master Belial. Mission is complete. Power link to the East Barrens has been severed. Pass on my praises to the brothers at Koth Ridge: the fury of the orks will fall upon them soon.’

Night insects chirruped and buzzed around the bright lamps illuminating the mine head compound. The snores of sleeping Free Militia troopers blended with the murmurs of those on watch and the crunch of the Space Marines’ boots as they walked the perimeter.

Boreas did not sleep, though he knew that there was little chance the orks would come this far north. His restlessness was born not out of concern for himself, but for his battle-brothers on Koth Ridge. There had been no word over the comm about the next ork thrust for Kadillus Harbour, but the Chaplain knew that it was likely to come soon. He stood looking down the mountainside at the

distant silhouette of Koth Ridge, imagining the Space Marines staring to the east, searching for the first signs of the ork offensive.

Four thousand metres higher up the slope of Kadillus's central mount, Barrak Gorge was situated at the end of a mighty split in the rocks. Lava flows in ages past had created a nest of interweaving gulleys and valleys. The geothermal station loomed over the gorge, beneath it the gaping caverns of the exhausted mine and the jutting structures of its workings.

A muttered exchange of orders warned Boreas that the Piscina force were changing their guard. He looked at the two hundred men huddled in their field blankets beneath rubberised sheet bivouacs. They had spent most of the five hours since Boreas's arrival complaining: about the cold, about the thin air, about the rations. Those complaints had not been voiced directly to the Chaplain, but had simply hovered in the air as the squads had moved about erecting their sandbagged positions and setting up their heavy weapons.

Boreas turned back and walked through the camp, trying to ignore the quiet chatter between the men coming off watch and those about to start their patrols. The Chaplain was no keener to be here than any of the defence troopers, though his reasons were far different. It was not the inconvenience or physical discomfort that displeased Boreas: it was the sense of foreboding that he would miss out on fighting the decisive battle of the campaign. He was sure that the next ork assault on Koth Ridge would be the last chance the alien filth had to unite their forces. When the orks were thrown back, it would be a simple matter to keep them scattered until the rest of the Chapter returned to aid in the final purging.

'I only wanted to get off the mega-trawlers,' Boreas heard one of the troopers say as the Chaplain walked past a squad of men hunkered behind a low plascrete wall. 'I thought if I joined the Free Militia I'd have a chance to get off-world. Now look at me! I'll be lucky to see Kadillus Harbour again.'

Boreas could see the young trooper's face illuminated in the dull aura of a heatplate. He was surely less than twenty years old, his blond hair cropped to his shoulders. The trooper looked up with shock as Boreas stepped into the glow of the heatplate. The squad saw the Chaplain's black armour and their eyes strayed to the skull helm hanging from his belt.

'There is no luck,' said the Chaplain. He crouched so that he was closer to their level, the servos in his armour creaking. 'Warriors live and die by their skill. If there is some other force that decides our destiny, it is the hand of the Emperor, not luck.'

‘Praise the Emperor,’ the blond-haired trooper replied unthinkingly.

Boreas looked at the men; saw their tired, strained expressions and the tightness with which they held their lasguns to their chests.

‘Skill and courage win more battles than luck,’ the Chaplain told them, his gaze resting on the trooper who had spoken. ‘Faith in yourselves and each other is the greatest faith you can possess. Do not dwell upon the hardships that you endure, but remember the great honour that you have been granted. Who else but you can say that they have stood upon the line, faced the foes of the Emperor and prevailed? Who else but you can say he was willing to lay down his life to protect his home? Most men pass their lives toiling in the darkness, the eye of the Emperor never seeing their labour, the ear of the Emperor never hearing their voices. The galaxy is swathed in shadows of evil and you have the opportunity to burn bright in the firmament, if only for a moment.

‘We who have seen war have seen the true struggle for existence. Others rest safe tonight, on this world and others, because you are here on this cold and forbidding mountain standing guard. Perhaps our watchfulness will go untested and others will be gifted with the opportunity for glorious battle. It matters not, for you can say to lesser men that you stood ready; to watch and to fight if need be.’

Boreas realised his words were as much for himself as the Piscinans.

‘My family died when the orks first entered Kadillus Harbour,’ said one trooper, his face lined with age and worry. ‘What do I fight for now? Everything is lost.’

Remembering that he was dealing with ordinary men, Boreas suppressed the growl that was rising in his throat. He coughed and did his best to keep his voice stern but gentle.

‘You fight for their memory, trooper. Would you have the orks trample your city to dust and destroy all of those that remember your family? They exist still in your soul and your heart, and in the souls and hearts of others that knew them. A memory is far harder to protect than a person. It can be swept away by fear and doubt, far more dangerous than any bullet or shell. The sacrifice of those you love should not weaken your resolve, but harden it. They have given their lives for the Imperium, whether willingly or not. Who are you to offer anything less? The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Imperium, trooper.’

Boreas straightened and saw the glare of conviction in the old trooper’s eyes. The Chaplain was about to leave when the blond trooper stopped him with a question.

‘Why do you fight for Piscina, sir?’

There were so many answers to give. Boreas could explain the happenstance that had led to the 3rd Company being on the world when the orks arrived. He could point out that Piscina IV was the Dark Angels' staging post for recruiting the savage tribesmen of Piscina V. It was tempting to explain the ancient pacts the Dark Angels held with the Imperial Commanders of Piscina. Boreas could speak about the bond of the battle-brothers that meant that where one fought, all fought.

He could even tell them that as a Chaplain it was his honour and his role to lead by example, to battle the fiercest enemies where the fighting was the most dangerous. Could he get them to understand the duty of the Space Marines, their ancient and eternal purpose as laid down by the Emperor since time immemorial?

All of these reasons and more he considered, but he settled for the simple answer that encapsulated them all.

'I am Astartes, the Emperor's finest,' he told them.

The Chaplain walked away, leaving the men to their quiet, human complaints. He found Sergeant Zaltys sitting on an outcrop of rock, gazing southwards at the cloudy sky. He cut a strange figure against the haze, the massive jump pack giving the sergeant a hunch-backed look. Zaltys looked around as Boreas crunched across the rocky ground.

'What do you look at, brother?' the Chaplain asked, stopping beside Zaltys.

'Nothing, Brother-Chaplain.' The sergeant returned to looking at the horizon. 'There is nothing to see. The orks are not coming here. Even if they are, it would take them more than a day to arrive. It is a strange role for an Assault squad, guarding a disused mine against an enemy that is not coming.'

'Master Belial acts in accordance with the best doctrines of combat, brother,' said Boreas, resting one hand on the haft of his crozius. 'It is wise that all strategic assets are garrisoned against capture by the enemy.'

Zaltys leaned forwards and picked up a small chunk of black rock. It crumbled as he closed his fist, dark dust trickling through the sergeant's armoured fingers.

'I do not judge Master Belial to be in error, I merely lament that it was my poor fortune to be available for this duty. Surely the Piscinans are force enough to dissuade any fast ork column that might seek to take the power plant?'

Boreas glanced back at the Free Militia squads and remembered the fragments of conversation he had overheard.

'Put them in Kadillus Harbour and they will fight to the death, of that I am sure,' said the Chaplain. 'Up here, far from the eyes of their superiors, far from

the homes they wish to protect? That is a different matter. It does not matter how much their commanders impress upon them the strategic importance of this place, all they hear is the empty sound of the wind. I share your misgivings, brother-sergeant, but it is because we will fight despite those misgivings that we will protect this place.'

'So you have little regard for our allies, brother?'

'They are men, brother, and nothing more,' said Boreas. 'I have no gauge by which I can measure their mettle by look alone, and everything they say is wrapped in the usual selfishness and self-pity that plague normal men. If they were left alone, I have no doubt they would fold before a concerted attack. With our presence, perhaps their backbones are stiffened, and pride if not honour will bolster their resolve.'

Zaltys pushed himself from the rock and looked back at the men clustered in the blaze of the lamps and the glow of their cooking plates.

'I think you do these men a disservice, brother,' said the sergeant. 'Was not every Space Marine once a weak and fallible man? Are we not proof that training and discipline can harden the mind and soul against the terrors of war?'

'We are not,' Boreas replied immediately. 'Even before we were welcomed into the Chapter, each of us was the best, greater than his peers, a diamond amongst the coal of humanity. We lived harsh, desperate lives and that is what makes us what we are.'

The Chaplain approached Zaltys and laid a hand on the sergeant's shoulder pad, fingers on the Dark Angels' symbol.

'The Apothecaries can shape our bodies, and the Chaplains shape our minds, but they can only build upon strong foundations. Only the perfect physiology can accept the gifts of the Lion's gene-seed; only the perfect spirit can accept the gift of the Lion's teachings. We are stronger, faster and braver than we could ever be before the Chapter accepted us, but never forget that we were never destined to grow up as *ordinary* men.'

Zaltys said nothing. The clouds scudded across the night sky as a moon rose above the shoulder of Mount Barrak, its light reflecting from the lenses of the Assault sergeant's helm, giving him eyes that glowed a silvery red. The Free Militia camp had fallen still again after the agitation of the watch change. It was almost possible to forget that a few dozen kilometres to the south a war-hungry foe numbering in their hundreds were preparing to wreak destruction and death. Almost, but not quite.

Boreas saw Zaltys gazing skywards again.

‘What is it that so concerns you about the heavens, brother?’ said the Chaplain.

‘I may have misled you earlier, Brother-Chaplain, and for that I offer apology,’ replied Zaltys. ‘I heard you speaking to those troopers about defending their homes and it reminded me of something, a memory that distracts me.’

‘What is this distraction?’

‘I was born on Piscina V, brother,’ the sergeant said. ‘Twice before I have returned to Piscina to recruit from my own people, but never before have I had to fight for their protection. It leaves me with a strange feeling of discomfort.’

‘Explain it to me.’

‘A Dark Angel has no home; that is what you teach us, Brother-Chaplain. The Chapter is our brotherhood and the Tower of Angels is our fortress. With blessed Caliban lost to us, the Dark Angels roam across the stars, free to pursue our foes and fulfil our duty.’

‘That is true. While the future of other Chapters is beholden to the fate of a single world, never again will the Dark Angels be brought low by such dependency. It is to be expected that you feel some connection to the planet that gave you life, but it is the Dark Angels that give you purpose.’

Zaltys did not seem to hear the Chaplain as he continued.

‘All I can really remember are jungles, and the huge beasts we hunted. Spears and blood, roars and the shouts of triumphant warriors. And the night the Chapter came for me, that I can still picture. For generations nobody had seen the warriors from the stars. There were those that doubted the stories, but I always believed. I listened to the tales and stared up into the starry sky and I knew that my place was elsewhere. My father and grandfather had been the finest warriors of the tribe, greater than their forefathers, but the warriors of the sky did not come from them. But I still believed they would come for me.’

‘I fail to see the relevance to our current mission, brother-sergeant.’

Zaltys gently shook his head.

‘Up there, millions of kilometres away, there is another youth of the tribes who can run faster than all of the others; is stronger than all of the others; who is braver than all of the others. We are supposed to be there to bring him to his destiny, but instead we are fighting here, against an enemy that does not even know about him.’

‘All the more reason to see the orks destroyed,’ said Boreas.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Zaltys. ‘Understand, brother, that you fight out of your duty to the Chapter, the honour of the Lion and our oaths to the Emperor. I fight because if Piscina falls, the Dark Angels will never return here. I am a Dark Angel now,

but the people that gave birth to me would be abandoned. A hundred generations from now they will still look to the heavens and wait for the warriors of the sky, but if we fail to protect Piscina that day will never come again.'

The assault sergeant banged his fist twice against Boreas's chestplate, his armoured gauntlet ringing on the embossed design of a winged skeleton that decorated the Chaplain's plastron.

'And that, Brother-Chaplain, is why I wish that I were on Koth Ridge, fighting for Piscina, and not here waiting for an enemy that will never arrive.'

Zaltys took a step but was stopped by Boreas's hand on his arm.

'There is no reason for regret, brother,' Boreas said. 'I will speak with Master Belial tomorrow and request that you be transferred to the defence line on Koth Ridge. Your savage ancestors have provided great warriors for the Chapter, and their descendants will do so for years to come. I will make sure you have the chance to protect that legacy.'

Zaltys nodded his head.

'Thank you, brother. You have the heart of the Lion as well as his wisdom.'

The Chaplain watched Zaltys return to the encampment and then turned his gaze to the south. Zaltys's outburst worried Boreas. It was natural that the sergeant felt a greater duty to Piscina than to other worlds, but that loyalty could not be allowed to grow stronger than his connection to the Chapter. When the fighting was concluded, Boreas would have to spend some time with Zaltys, reminding the sergeant of his oaths of allegiance, leading him in the prayers of remembrance and dedication; he would help expunge these distracting memories and Zaltys would be free again to love the Chapter without regret.

Such was the nature of the Chaplains, to be ever alert to the faintest glimmer of laxity or doubt. The 10th Company trained a Space Marine; the Apothecaries created his superhuman body; the armoury provided his armour and weapons. It was the Chaplains that gave a Space Marine the most deadly tool in his arsenal: righteousness of purpose. Without it, a Space Marine was nothing.

Adherence to the Chapter's teachings, participating in the brotherhood of warriors that was the Dark Angels, was the core of discipline and fearlessness. An Apothecary could tinker with glands and hormones and proteins, but such manipulation was merely a foundation upon which the Chaplains built courage, honour and aggression.

Just thinking about his duties fired Boreas's spirit. To be a Chaplain was to demand the highest expectation, of oneself as well as one's battle-brothers. Boreas remembered the sense of justice and completeness he had felt when the

last ork had died in the basilica, and felt it again as real as the first moment.

It was more than hatred of the enemy that fuelled Boreas's self-belief. Privy to the ancient secrets of the Chapter he knew the price that would be paid for a moment of hesitation or doubt. Nearly ten thousand years had passed since those days of treachery, when Lion El'jonson had been set upon by those he had trusted. Boreas had heard the lies from the lips of those traitors, extracted in the depths of the Tower of Angels. He had heard first-hand how deceit had grown in the hearts of Space Marines. If he was harsh, it was because Boreas understood the dangers of equivocation.

It was sometimes a heavy burden to bear. Boreas looked at Zaltys rejoining his squad and for a moment tried to remember what it was like to simply be a Dark Angel, before he had been inducted into the Inner Circle and learned about the Chapter's moment of weakness during the Horus Heresy. Had he been weaker or stronger for his ignorance? It was impossible to say; Boreas had been out of the 10th Company for less than a year when the Chaplains had summoned him and told him that his strength of mind marked him out to become one of their number.

He had been filled with pride that day. Not the kind of pride that leads a Space Marine to believe himself better than his brothers, but pride that he had something to offer the Chapter. Had he known then what he would learn over the next decades, he would not have been so glad that his strengths had been recognised. He had needed all of that mental fortitude, and the unending support of his brother Chaplains, to come to terms with the ignominy of the Dark Angels' failure those many centuries ago.

For a lesser man – even a lesser Space Marine – those interrogations with the Fallen would have weakened resolve. For Boreas, the opposite was true. Every different lie he heard, every false justification and self-aggrandising rationale that was spat out in the interrogation cells was a confirmation of his devotion to the Lion and his trust for the Dark Angels. No matter how persuasive the argument or reasoned the principles espoused by those that had turned on the primarch, Boreas was reminded on each occasion of the self-serving nature of those that had become traitors.

His last interrogation had been particularly fraught, his subject espousing all kinds of propaganda and venom against the Lion, challenging the primarch's loyalty to the Emperor. That treacherous viper had been amongst the worst, an instigator of the rebellion and an unashamed detractor of the Lion.

Boreas recalled the Fallen's name: Astelan. He had not repented and had clung

to his self-delusional beliefs despite every effort of the Chaplain. Raving and half-mad, the Fallen had made wild claims and re-invented history for his own purposes. What truth could there be from the mouth of a self-confessed architect of genocide, who had the brazen nerve to be proud of his defiance of the Lion and the Emperor?

It was against such insanity that the Chaplains had to contend. And from the lies the truth was eked out, teased from the misinformation and posturing. Over ten thousand years the Chaplains had learnt a great deal about treachery and how to spot its earliest signs, from the evidence given by those who had succumbed.

With this knowledge Boreas could strike against the smallest seed of doubt and crush it before it took hold. Zaltys was a Space Marine of the Dark Angels and Boreas did not doubt his devotion for a moment. Yet there were those who had been trusted before, by none other than the Lion himself, who had proved the error of indulgence. Zaltys meant no harm and was no threat – yet.

His sentimental attachment to his home world was a tiny chink in the armour of his soul; one that could be exploited if it was not repaired. What today was a reason for fighting even more fiercely against the orks could tomorrow become a reason for disobedience. If, against all expectation, the Dark Angels failed to stem the ork attack and Piscina had to be sacrificed for strategic reasons, could Zaltys be trusted to obey the order, and more importantly, pass it on to those who served under him?

A thrum of anti-grav motors from the patrolling Ravenwing land speeder swept past the power plant. As the Ravenwing stood watch against the enemy without, Boreas was alert for an even deadlier foe: the enemy within.

The night passed quietly. Boreas sat on a rock, cleaning his bolt pistol as the horizon to the east fringed with red. He looked around as the hum of the Ravenwing's land speeder shook the ground behind him. The black-liveried speeder settled down a few metres away, stopping just above the ground. Brother Amathael jumped out, leaving the heavy bolter to droop on its mount, its muzzle clanging against the speeder's hull. Amathael bent down and looked at something on the vehicle's underside.

'Is something wrong, brother?' Boreas asked over the comm.

'I am not sure, brother,' Amathael replied.

His black armour almost invisible, the Ravenwing Space Marine ducked under the floating land speeder. The rocks around the mine head echoed with the sound of his armoured fist thumping against metal. The Space Marine emerged with a

twisted length of branch in his hand. He held it up to the driver, Methaniel, as if in explanation.

'We must have picked this up during our last pass through that gorge to the east,' said Amathael as he tossed the offending branch aside. 'How's the sensor return now, brother?'

Hearing this exchange, Boreas stood up and walked over to the land speeder as it rose a few metres into the air, its twin-fan engine throbbing. The ground shimmered through the craft's anti-grav field, dust kicked up by the gravitic impellers keeping the land speeder aloft. The Chaplain's autosenses registered a wave of electromagnetic energy emitted by the antenna jutting from the blunt nose of the craft as the pilot activated the long-range augur.

'There is still something wrong, brother,' reported Methaniel. 'I'm getting a large, blurred return. Check the housing again.'

The land speeder settled down once more under Methaniel's direction and there followed some more thuds as Amathael effected his own form of repairs.

'The links are all in place,' said Amathael. 'Check the connections on the chin-mount.'

Pneumatics wheezed as the multi-barrelled assault cannon slung beneath the land speeder's nose swivelled left and right. At a command from the pilot, the assault cannon's barrel spun up to firing speed with a whine and then slowed to a low growl.

'I think your crude attentions have offended the spirit of the sensor matrix, brother,' said Methaniel. 'I told you to ask Brother Hephaestus to cast his blessing upon it before we left Kadillus Harbour.'

'Master Belial's orders were specific, brother,' Amathael said. 'There was not time to seek the Techmarines.'

Boreas cleared his throat meaningfully, interrupting the two Space Marines' bickering.

'Explain the situation, brothers,' said the Chaplain.

Amathael and Methaniel looked at each other, waiting for the other to speak. Amathael conceded first and turned to Boreas.

'We have suffered damage to the long-range augur, Brother-Chaplain,' the Ravenwing gunner admitted. 'We thought we might effect a field repair, but it seems the land speeder's spirit is more troubled than we realised.'

'You felt it necessary to abandon your patrol for this matter?' Boreas kept his tone even, masking his annoyance.

'We have been up and down the mountain all night, brother,' said Amathael.

‘There’s nothing more threatening than a few rock lizards.’

‘How long ago did you first experience this sensor problem, brothers?’ Boreas asked patiently.

‘No more than twenty minutes, Brother-Chaplain,’ said Methaniel.

‘And you are experiencing an unexpected sensor return at the moment?’

Methaniel looked down at the console and nodded.

‘Yes,’ said the pilot. ‘The accursed thing thinks there’s a huge heat source three kilometres away. If it were caused by the orks, there would have to be hundreds of them to register like that.’

‘I think we should investigate,’ Amathael said hurriedly. He glanced at Boreas and then pulled himself up to the gunner’s position next to Methaniel. ‘Better to be sure, is that not right, Brother-Chaplain?’

Boreas allowed his deafening silence to answer for him.

‘Dawn patrol protocol,’ said Amathael. ‘Sweep east to west. Let us not distract the Brother-Chaplain any longer.’

Boreas shook his head with disappointment as the twin glows of the land speeder’s engine disappeared into the night. A certain freedom of spirit and independence was required of the Ravenwing, but poor patrol discipline was unacceptable. When the Chapter returned, Boreas would be making a report to Brother Sammael, Master of the Ravenwing, regarding Brothers Amathael and Methaniel. Such cavalier behaviour would not be tolerated by the 3rd Company.

A few minutes later, the shouts of the Piscinans’ lieutenants calling for the morning watch echoed around the mine head. Troopers roused themselves wearily from their blankets, their babble adding to the noise. Walking amongst them, Boreas heard something else above the low din, echoing from the gorge to the south. It was a loud drone, like the buzzing of an immense wasp.

The Chaplain recognised the sound instantly: an assault cannon firing.

A moment after he heard the sound, the comm chimed in Boreas’s ear.

‘Brother Boreas!’ Methaniel’s voice was urgent. The comm rattled with the sound of Amathael’s heavy bolter and continued sporadic bursts from the assault cannon. ‘This is Ravenwing-Six. Hostile force encountered, two kilometres south of your position. We are falling back out of weapons range. Heavy enemy presence. Requesting orders, Brother-Chaplain.’

Boreas’s first act was to switch the transmission to general broadcast.

‘Brothers of the Lion, sons of Piscina: the enemy are upon us! Gather yourselves and prepare your weapons. Today our courage and our strength will be tested. We will not be found lacking.’ The Chaplain switched back to the

command channel. ‘Ravenwing-Six, this is Boreas. Estimate enemy numbers.’

‘Four hundred to five hundred including light vehicles and Dreadnoughts, brother,’ said Methaniel, his voice calmer. ‘Count five warbikes approaching, and one of those flamethrower light half-tracks. Orders, brother?’

‘Engage the warbikes and slow their attack,’ Boreas said, striding into the heart of his force. He looked around to gauge the readiness of the defenders. The reaction had been mixed. Zaltys and his Assault Marines were bounding off to the left, to take up positions opposite the ruins of one of the mine’s administration buildings. The Piscina troopers were rushing to and fro, some of them at their posts, others caught out as they had been preparing their breakfast. ‘We need at least two minutes, Ravenwing-Six.’

‘Confirm, brother. Attack delayed for two minutes.’

Boreas took his place at the centre of the line, behind a crude wall of broken rock and dirt-filled rations crates. Just in front, a worried-looking Piscinan lieutenant was shrieking orders at his command squad as they set up their autocannon. The squad already inside the emplacement were reluctant to leave their cover, leaving no room for the anti-tank gun. The officer’s high-pitched entreaties were only adding to the confusion. Boreas stepped up next to the frantic officer, the Space Marine’s shadow falling over the men manhandling the heavy weapon onto its tripod.

‘You will have more success if you site your weapon on the flatter ground over there,’ Boreas cut across the troopers’ chatter. He pointed to an emplacement a dozen metres to the right which was as yet unmanned. ‘Do not allow haste to detract from your preparations, you have plenty of time.’

The officer bobbed his head nervously and signalled to his men to move to the empty position. Boreas grabbed the man by the arm as he set off after his squad, taking care not to hurt the officer.

‘I expect you to show calmness and discipline, lieutenant,’ Boreas said. ‘Remember that your men will look to you for leadership. I know that you are afraid, but you must not show it. You are an officer representing the Emperor, never forget that.’

The lieutenant said nothing as he nodded again and took a deep breath. Boreas held the man back for a few seconds more until he was convinced that he was calmer. Looking across to the next emplacement, he saw that the autocannon was already set up, ready for the ork vehicles.

‘Join your men and fight with courage and honour,’ said Boreas, giving the lieutenant a light shove to send him on his way.

‘This is Ravenwing-Six. Two warbikes destroyed, Brother-Chaplain,’ Methaniel reported over the comm. ‘Heavy bolter destroyed, gunner dead. Orders, brother.’

‘Continue to delay the enemy,’ Boreas replied. ‘Sacrifice if necessary. Confirm.’

‘Confirm, Brother-Chaplain,’ the land speeder pilot answered without hesitation.

Boreas examined the deployment of his small force. Many of them were too far back, lingering within the protection of the power plant rather than at the front line. They had all but surrendered the outer buildings of the mine-workings with their hesitancy but it was too late to move them forwards.

The Chaplain contacted Zaltys.

‘The orks are likely to gain the outer perimeter of the compound, brother-sergeant. Stay free of engagement until the moment is right to counter-attack. If the enemy force a position into those buildings you will have to drive them out; I fear our allies are incapable of such offensive action.’

‘Confirm, Brother-Chaplain. We will allow the Piscinans to blunt the attack and then assault when enemy momentum is wavering.’

The comm crackled as another transmission came in from the Ravenwing land speeder.

‘This is Ravenwing-Six. Revise upwards enemy force estimate. Five hundred infantry minimum. I can see heavily armoured leaders approaching up the gorge. Must conclude that Koth Ridge is not the enemy obj–’

The comm cut and an explosion echoed up the valley. Boreas increased the magnification of his autosenses and saw a blossom of red fire about half a kilometre away. Smoke trails from the ork bikes and light half-tracks were not much further away.

The Chaplain switched his comm to universal address.

‘This is your commander, Chaplain Boreas of the Dark Angels. Today will test your resolve like no other. You do not fight to protect an abandoned mine, but to halt the orks that have come to destroy your world. An enemy has come here to kill and enslave your loved ones. Our foes are many but we have a far superior position. Today each of you has the opportunity to be a hero of the Emperor. Count only the dead of the enemy and pay no heed to the fears that whisper. Every ork you kill is one less that will fall upon your homes and families. Share the rage of the Dark Angels and slay these loathsome creatures. *Sanctorius via mortis majorus*. Kill without relent and taste the sweetness of victory!’

Zaltys and his Assault Marines gave a roar of approval, though the reaction

from the Piscinans was more muted. Most of the troopers were staring along their lasgun sights, worriedly awaiting the approach of the greenskins. A nervous quiet descended on the force and the rumble of the engines reverberated up the gorge towards Boreas. He could see a thick pall of smoke, presumably from the destroyed land speeder, and the paler exhaust fumes of the orks' warbikes.

As the bikes roared into view, heavy weapons teams to the Chaplain's right opened fire with lascannons and autocannons, filling the gorge with a hail of shells and blue bursts of energy. One of the bikes exploded immediately, struck in the engine by a lascannon bolt. Two more bikers jinked their half-track vehicles between the storms of splintering rock and ravening blasts of laser energy.

The warbikes were even larger than the combat bikes of the Ravenwing, each laden with rapid-firing cannons that spewed bullets up the gorge. They both had a churning track instead of a rear wheel, which threw up huge fountains of dirt and grit in their wake.

Their ork riders wore thick-rimmed goggles to protect their eyes and their fanged mouths were hidden behind brightly patterned scarves, a crude defence against the choking dust and smoke. The orks' thick jackets were daubed with stripes of red to match the paintwork of their machines. A pennant with a flaming skull fluttered from a pole behind one rider, who wore a spiked helmet painted with a similar design. The other biker's head was protected by a black leather cap studded with small spikes. As the rider's scarf fell away, Boreas could see that the ork frothed at the mouth, driven to a delirium by the speed of his machine and the chatter of the guns.

Boreas was not the least concerned by the rapidly approaching bikes. He had studied the reports from the assault on Koth Ridge and it appeared the orks were repeating their mistakes. In their enthusiasm to get to grips with the enemy, the bikers were far ahead of the ork infantry and would be easy prey for the heavy weapons teams.

A few seconds after the bikes had emerged from behind a ruined shack half a kilometre down the ravine, a second exploded into a rising fireball of red as the autocannon gunners found their range. Debris rained down onto the rocks to either side of the valley and a thick pall of smoke wafted up around the Piscinans, the grey tinged with green fuel vapours.

The surviving biker veered wildly to the left and right, the pennant whipping back and forth, billowing dust almost filling the gorge. It was impossible for the ork to aim its weapons at such speed; torrents of heavy bullets screeched

overhead and rattled around the upper storeys of the power plant. It was ludicrous behaviour and Boreas concluded that the alien had been filled by some kind of strange battle-mania.

The thudding of the heavy bolters joined the crack of lascannons and shriek of autocannons as the biker roared closer and closer. A bolt exploded against the magazine of one of the bike's cannons, igniting the shells within. Trailing fire and smoke, the warbike careened across the gorge, bouncing over rocks and cracks, until it smashed into the wall of the gorge. Fuel and oil spilled down the slope back in the direction of the orks. Ammunition continued to pop and a few seconds after impact a shower of sparks set the slick aflame, a crackling inferno engulfing the right-hand side of the gorge.

Switching his helm to terrorsight to peer through the fumes and dust filling the approach to the mine head, Boreas could see another half-tracked vehicle closing swiftly. It was a little larger than the warbikes and pulled a long trailer connected by a profusion of tubes and pipes. A diminutive gretchin clung on to the back of the trailer, holding on to a wheel-lock for dear life. Over the head of the driver extended a funnel-like spout dripping with burning fuel.

It was only when Boreas noticed that the Piscinans were not shooting that the Chaplain realised the crude cunning of the ork plan. The greenskins' commander had sent the bikes forwards knowing they would be destroyed, and in the close confines of the gorge, the dust and smoke were blocking the aim of the troopers defending the geothermal station. It was a screen to allow the orks to get closer.

'Mortars!' Boreas bellowed. 'Fill that gorge with bombs!'

The troopers responded as quickly as they could but the flamethrower half-track was already roaring out of the smog, the driver gunning his vehicle directly at the closest emplacement. Shocked Piscinans shouted warnings to each other and a few autocannon rounds zipped down the gorge without finding their mark.

The whine of descending mortar bombs joined the roar of the half-track's engine and the cries of the defence force officers. A ripple of explosions tore from left to right across the gorge, metres behind the approaching vehicle, throwing up another curtain of dust and smoke.

'Sergeant Zaltys!' Boreas turned to face the Assault squad. 'Intercept that vehicle before it reaches the defensive line!'

'Affirm, Brother-Chaplain.' The sergeant was already leading his squad forwards with long leaps as he replied.

Covering twenty metres with each jump, the Assault squad sped down the ravine, their pistols hurling bolts and blasts of plasma at the war-track. The

vehicle's gunner heaved around the nozzle of the flamethrower and fired. A jet of bright orange arced across the gorge, engulfing Zaltys's squad. One of the Assault Marines was caught full by the inferno and tumbled mid-jump, crashing into the rock amidst a plume of flames and flying shards of armour. The others plunged out of the crackling wave of flame, fire licking from their blackened armour.

The gunner fired again and swung the flamethrower around as the vehicle's driver swerved away from the charging Space Marines. Burning fuel erupted across the boulders and rocky ground but fell short. Zaltys and the others burst through the sheet of flame and fell upon the vehicle with fierce war cries.

One Assault Marine landed on the front of the track housing, a booted foot smashing the driver from his saddle. The ork tumbled beneath the whirring links, the towed fuel trailer bouncing over its mangled corpse.

The mad swaying of the trailer caused Zaltys to mistime his leap; the sergeant crashed shoulder-first into the side of the trailer, dislodging the gretchin atop the cylindrical tank of fuel. Metal panels burst their rivets and thick, oily sludge seeped from the ruptured tank, spilling over the sergeant and another of the Assault Marines.

Even without a driver, the ork vehicle roared onwards up the gorge, the Assault Marines leaping after it. One of the squad landed squarely on the back of the fuel trailer. Boreas saw the Space Marine slap a melta-bomb onto the side of the leaking tank and heard the warning shout across the comm.

Less than a dozen metres from the foremost emplacement, the squad peeled away from the doomed vehicle, launching themselves high into the air with their jump packs as the melta-bomb detonated. The fuel tank exploded with a blast that sent a hot wind rushing up the valley, throwing several of the closest Piscinans from their feet. The remnants of the half-track were hurled in a burning arc across a line of dirt-filled crates, and crashed against the rough wall with another detonation.

There were a few cries of pain from wounded troopers. Sergeants and officers bellowed to their men to keep the line while two medics dashed forwards to see what could be done for those caught in the explosion. Boreas spied the gretchin who had been flung clear of the trailer crawling behind a rock. He was about to warn Zaltys but the sergeant had already seen the creeping greenskin. The sergeant's hand flamer bathed the creature's hiding place with white-hot fire.

'Live by fire, die by fire,' Zaltys grunted over the comm, no doubt with some satisfaction. The sergeant crossed the gorge to his fallen battle-brother and shook

his head. ‘Brother Lemaseus is dead. Remember him for his sacrifice.’

‘His deeds will live for eternity,’ Boreas replied.

The Assault Marines hauled up the smoking body of their fallen comrade and carried it back towards the mine head. Behind them a dark mass could be seen through the thinning smoke as the orks raced up the gorge. Boreas could hear their guttural war shouts, the jangle of wargear and the *clump* of boots on rock.

‘Stand ready to engage the enemy,’ the Chaplain commanded the troopers around him.

The orks rushed from the smog as a wall of green flesh, clothed in black and yellow. Boreas saw glaring red eyes and snarling fangs, repeated hundreds of times as the baying ork mob thundered between the rocky walls of the gorge. They howled and roared their challenges as they pounded up the slope.

Boreas heard answering shouts, of dismay rather than anger. Amidst the din of the orks’ charge he detected the scrape of boots and the thud of dropped weapons. Turning to his right, he saw at least two dozen of the Piscinans abandoning their posts, ignoring the shouts of their sergeants.

The fleeing troopers streamed back into the geothermal station as quickly as they could run, their panicked shouts urging their fellow Piscinans to come with them.

‘Hold the line!’ roared Boreas, swinging around to confront the closest defence troopers. One or two that had been edging away from the barricade slunk back into position and lifted up their lasrifles. ‘Open fire, damn you!’

Utterly livid at the Piscinans’ retreat, Boreas wanted to snatch up the cowards and dash open their skulls on the rock. He took several steps towards the fleeing men, blazing crozius in hand, but stopped as the snap of las-fire and the crack of ork guns reminded the Chaplain that he had more immediate concerns.

‘*Traitorium eternis.* May your souls rot in the darkness of the abyss for your treachery,’ Boreas snarled at the swiftly disappearing backs of the departing troopers.

He returned to his position to find the orks barely a hundred metres away. As he had feared, some of them had reached the outbuildings unscathed and were unleashing heavy if inaccurate covering fire for those greenskins still sprinting towards the troopers’ line. Bullets and las-bolts criss-crossed the narrowing gap between defenders and attackers.

The mortars opened up again, ripping holes into the oncoming mass of green flesh. Swathes of orks were bloodily hurled from their feet as the autocannons added their roar to the defence.

Boreas gauged the state of the battle with one sweeping glance. The fire from around him was sporadic as the orks in the ruined administration building poured bullets into the barricades. Despite that, the orks were slowing as more and more of their numbers fell to the wall of las-fire and shells. To the right the orks were approaching more swiftly, heading for the gaps left by the troopers who had fled. The left was holding firm, pinning the orks back behind a line of rocks that jutted out from the wall of the gorge.

'Boreas to Zaltys, cross to the right flank and cover the holes left by those cowards.'

'Affirm, Brother-Chaplain.'

As the Assault Marines powered from one end of the line to the other, Boreas pulled out his pistol. The orks had slowed in their advance and stopped every few metres to snap off shots at the geothermal station's defenders. Had he been commanding a force of Astartes, Boreas would have ordered the counter-charge at this point, to drive the orks back down into the gorge. Such a tactic was not an option; Boreas knew it was a hope that the Piscinans would hold their line and there was no chance they would want to get any closer to their enemies.

'Fire discipline!' Boreas bellowed at the officers within earshot, noting the sporadic and woefully inaccurate bursts of las-fire from the troopers as they hurried their shots. 'Mark your targets and concentrate your fire.'

A small measure of order rippled along the line from the Chaplain and the rush of fire slackened for a few seconds and then intensified into proper volleys. The ork dead littered the ground and those that survived were reluctant to leave the cover of the rocks and ruined buildings. There were few enemies within range of Boreas's bolt pistol. Those that were foolish enough to show themselves were quickly picked off by the Chaplain, who fired short bursts of two and three shots with unerring accuracy.

Slowly the orks lost interest in the firefight and slunk back down the slope, occasionally turning to unleash a hail of bullets or hurl insults.

The ferocity of the battle waned. As the odd bullet whined up the gorge from the administration building, Boreas walked the line to inspect the state of his force. About a tenth of the troopers had fled from the initial onslaught and a few more had slipped away in the confusion of battle. Casualties were surprisingly light, no more than ten troopers had been killed – along with Brother Lemaseus – and another fifteen were too badly wounded to fight on. About twice that number had suffered lesser injuries and were shepherded back to their posts

by their officers, bloodied and bandaged.

All in all Boreas was pleased with the Piscinans that had held their nerve and stayed on the line. Of those that had deserted, there was no sign. They had fled along the narrow channels and gulleys that criss-crossed the slope of the mountain and were no doubt already heading back to Kadillus Harbour. There was nothing Boreas could do about them now, but he would have words with the Piscinan commanders later to ensure those that had abandoned their posts would be found and chastised.

There was a brief flurry of more intensive fire from the orks in the administration building, under the cover of which two dozen or more greenskins broke from their hiding places and occupied a low shack that had once been a workshop. The ork shooting slackened again and the two sides settled down to occasional sniping at one another as targets presented themselves. Scornful of the orks' accuracy, Boreas strode from emplacement to emplacement, reminding the officers of their duty and reassuring the troopers that the worst had passed.

Reaching the right end of the line, Boreas joined Zaltys. The sergeant was changing the fuel canister on his hand flamer.

'The enemy will come again, brother,' said the sergeant. 'Orks won't have come all this way just to give up after the first charge.'

'Our defiance has blunted their blood-lust,' replied the Chaplain. 'They'll be more cautious next time. They'll use the administration building to gather their numbers and then come at us through those boulders on the left.'

Zaltys surveyed the lay of the land and nodded.

'That seems likely, Brother-Chaplain. We can hold this flank, and you can concentrate the Piscinans to the centre and left.'

Boreas considered this, eyes scanning the battlefield for likely routes of attack, angles of fire and blind spots.

'Very well, brother-sergeant,' he said. 'Next time the orks fall back, follow up with an attack to the administration building. I will attempt to lead a second attack along the left and come at the orks from the other side.'

The Chaplain walked back to the central emplacements, calling for the Piscinan officers to attend to him. He repositioned the heavy weapons squads to cover the administration complex and moved the bulk of the troopers further left to guard against enemies moving through the rocks and bushes that lined the eastern side of the gorge. Further down the slope the orks were also rearranging their forces, flashes of green and yellow moving between the scattered boulders and tumbled walls.

Satisfied that he was prepared for the next assault, Boreas took up his place at the centre of the reformed line and signalled Master Belial on the long-range comm.

'Chaplain Boreas to Master Belial. Have engaged enemy at Barrak Gorge station. Report to be made.'

There was no response for a minute. When Belial replied, his tone was clipped and breathless.

'This is Belial. Make your report, brother.'

'The orks have moved to Barrak Gorge during the night and attacked shortly after daybreak, brother-captain.' Boreas paced back and forth a few steps as he assessed the enemy strength. 'We have engaged a significant portion of the ork army. Several hundred infantry at a minimum. Several light vehicles destroyed. Risk to the geothermal station is negligible at present, our position is secure.'

Again there was a lengthy pause.

'It is imperative, absolutely vital, that the orks do not succeed in capturing the power station, brother. Brother Naaman succeeded in breaching the ork lines and we have located the means by which they are reaching the surface. The orks are using Piscina's power grid to power some form of high-energy teleporter to move their troops from an as-yet-unknown location. I have just returned from an attack at the East Barrens plant to disable their power link.

'Your operation to sever the link between Kadillus Harbour and the Barrens has also curtailed their reinforcements and I expect it is that which has triggered this attack on Barrak Gorge. Any advantage gained from these actions will be lost if the enemy are able to take another power station.'

'I understand, brother-captain,' said Boreas, staring at the ork army with renewed interest. 'Barrak Gorge will not fall to the enemy.'

'It must not.' Belial sharply emphasised every word. 'I expect the orks to repair the damage done at East Barrens, but that alone will not be enough for them to resume their widespread reinforcement. If we are to contain the ork threat until the rest of the Chapter arrives we must cut off the ork forces at their source. They cannot gain access to another power plant.'

'Understood, brother-captain. The Dark Angels will not allow this world to fall to the foul xenos.'

'Their taint will be cleansed from Piscina. The orks will learn to fear the Sons of Caliban.'

The next ork attack came just before noon.

The assault was heralded by a hail of heavy weapons fire from the administration building a few seconds before a tide of green-skinned warriors poured from the doors and broken windows and rushed to the eastern side of the gorge.

'Conserve ammunition and wait for targets,' Boreas growled to his soldiers. The orks would be desperate to claim the power station and Belial had given no word of when Boreas's force could expect relief.

The orks made use of what cover there was amongst the rocks and scrub. Rather than charge headlong into the fire of the Piscinans, the greenskins worked their way forwards with more care. For all their attempted stealth, the orks were too numerous for them to all find cover and a trail of blood and bodies marked their progress up the gorge as las-fire zipped through the bushes and heavy bolter rounds detonated across the boulders.

Boreas ejected the magazine from his bolt pistol and slipped his hand into a pouch at his belt. He brought out a fresh clip, loaded with special seeker bolts that Techmarine Hephaestus had presented to the Chaplain after the defence of the basilica. Each handcrafted round contained a miniature cogitator capable of steering the bolt towards the heat signature of a target.

'Let the hidden hand guide thee to the doom of my foes,' Boreas whispered to the tiny spirits of each bolt as he slotted the fresh magazine in place.

He switched the tactical display of his helm to thermal view and watched for a few seconds as the orks crept along the gorge, their bodies a white glow amongst the warm yellow of the sun reflecting from stone. With a light touch against the trigger of his raised pistol, Boreas activated the weapon's targeter and zoomed in on his foes.

The Chaplain fired a burst of three rounds and watched the fiery trails of the bolts as they flashed through the air. Two of the bolts zeroed in on an ork crouched behind the twisted trunk of a tree, exploding inside the creature's back and leg. The third turned sharply, rose a few metres and dived out of sight behind a rock, detonating with a shower of blood that showed up as a spray of warm droplets.

Boreas fired twice more as the orks broke from cover with a storm of pistol fire. The blossoms of the bolt detonations were lost in the hail of las-blasts and muzzle flares that engulfed the surging orks. Boreas flicked back to normal-spectrum view and took in the change of battle at a glance.

'Mortars on the administration building,' Boreas ordered as a fresh salvo of weapons fire erupted from the complex. 'Autocannon teams, cover the centre.

Left flank, prepare for close combat.'

He leapt over the rough barricade and pounded to the east to stave off the ork assault. Raging and shouting, the orks poured into the two front emplacements, hacking with their heavy blades and firing madly with their pistols. The troopers stabbed and parried with bayonets and swung the butts of their lasrifles at the greenskins while officers cut and thrust with chainswords and urged their men to hold their ground.

'With me!' Boreas bellowed to a squad of Piscinans in the next emplacement.

'You heard the commander!' roared their sergeant, grabbing one of the troopers by the scruff of his flak jacket to haul the soldier to his feet.

Boreas barely heard the padding of their boots after him, his ears filled with the thunder of his twin hearts as the surge of battle consumed him. He fired another salvo of twisting, deadly shots and plunged into the melee with his crozius blazing.

Crashing through a wall of empty ammunition boxes, the Chaplain struck out at the back of an ork's skull, smashing through bone. His backswing took another greenskin full in the throat. Pistol rounds disappeared in flares of light around Boreas as his rosarius field activated. He shouldered aside another ork, which was set upon by the squad following the Chaplain.

'Drive them back!' Boreas illustrated the order by smashing his bolt pistol into the face of an ork, splintering fangs, crushing its puggy nose. 'Let the Emperor's wrath fill your limbs!'

Boreas's pistol barked in his hand, bolts tearing through the orks around him. His crozius carved a path of blood and shattered bone. The Piscinans were being battered to their knees and cut down by the ferocious orks, but the presence of the Chaplain bolstered the nerve of the troopers and they fought on with gritted teeth and wide eyes.

'Brother-Chaplain.' Zaltys's calm voice cut through the haze of anger that washed through Boreas. The Chaplain side-stepped a cleaver and drove his knee into the gut of the ork wielding it.

'Report, brother-sergeant,' Boreas snarled.

'Enemy are gathering for an attack against the centre, brother. Shall I move to engage?'

Boreas rammed his elbow into the jaw of a greenskin and fired a bolt into its chest as it fell back. The Chaplain was surrounded by a press of foes and could see nothing of the wider battle.

'I leave it to your discretion, brother,' he told Zaltys. 'The orks must not gain a

foothold within the power plant.'

'Confirm, brother. We will engage if the enemy reach the power plant.'

A spinning, toothed blade slammed into the side of Boreas's helm, dazing him in a shower of sparks and shredded ceramite. Out of instinct, he swept up his arm to knock away the blade, its jagged edge ripping a furrow through the Chaplain's elbow pad. He kicked out and felt the ork's ribs collapsing. Blinking to restore his blurred vision, Boreas found himself face-to-face with the snarling alien, two dagger-like tusks jutting from its jaw.

Boreas let go of his crozius so that it swung on its chain from his wrist, and grabbed the throat of the ork, fingers digging into corded muscle. The ork's eyes bulged and thick saliva drooled from its twisted lips as Boreas bent the creature backwards, twisting its spine. A hand hammered at Boreas's chest, claws leaving scratches on the embossed design. With a grunt, Boreas lurched forwards, snapping the ork's spine. The Chaplain fired a round into the greenskin's chest as it flopped in his grasp.

With a flick of his arm, Boreas snatched up his crozius just in time to ward away a crackling power claw swinging at his face. The two power fields met with a flash of blue sparks. The Chaplain matched stares with his foe; an ork even taller than Boreas wearing thick pads of armour covered with riveted plates. The bestial alien closed the claws of its glove into a fist and punched the Chaplain in the chest. Boreas's rosarius blazed, absorbing most of the impact, though the Chaplain was forced back a step by the blow.

A frown of confusion knotted the ork's brow. It glanced down at its power claw, tears streaking down its face from the light of the conversion field's activation. Boreas swept his crozius upwards, the winged angel on its top connecting squarely with the chin of the greenskin.

The ork fell to its backside, shaking its head, jaw split to the bottom lip. Boreas stamped, crushing the heel of his boot into the greenskin's face. With a spasm of reaction, the ork clamped its energy-wreathed claw around Boreas's knee. The Chaplain felt armour buckling and a warning light flashed in the corner of his right eye.

Wrenching himself free from the ork's death-grip, Boreas stumbled back a few steps, his knee flaring with pain. In a moment the acute sensation passed, to be replaced by a dull throbbing that even his armour's pain suppressants could not wholly mask.

The Chaplain was aware of shouting. He looked up and saw that the orks were falling back, limping and bleeding, dispirited by the death of the leader Boreas

had slain. The Chaplain took a deep breath and looked to his right, where the fighting was still fierce.

Zaltys's squad had torn into the central attack and were pursuing the broken orks down the gorge. There was still an intense firefight between the squads at the base of the power plant and the orks in the administration buildings. The orks' position was wreathed in a cloud of dust from the mortar bombardment and Boreas could see the corpses of many greenskins piled behind the broken walls and hanging from shattered windows.

There was similar carnage close at hand. At a glance he counted at least thirty dead orks around the barricades, and more than that number of fallen troopers. He saw an officer's body draped in a tattered, blood-soaked great-coat, the Piscinan's chainsword still stuck in the chest of a dead ork. The hacked and broken bodies of squad-mates were heaped upon each other, their faces caught in their last moments of agony and horror.

Limping slightly, Boreas stepped up to the remnants of the barricade. He activated the long-range comm.

'Chaplain Boreas to Master Belial. Contact report.'

The response was far quicker than earlier.

'This is Belial. Make your report, brother.'

'Second enemy attack met, brother-captain. We still have possession of the power plant. Position secure but request further forces.'

'Negative, brother. There are no more forces available at this time. We cannot weaken our presence in the city or on Koth Ridge. Scout reports suggest that you are not facing the bulk of the enemy army. This is just a raiding force. You must continue to hold.'

'Understood, brother. We may have faced the worst of it. Casualty ratio seven-to-one, we will cleanse this unclean horde from the galaxy!'

Boreas cut the link and assessed the remaining strength of his troops. Judging by the number of bodies over half the Piscinans had fallen, while the number of those remaining showed that twenty or thirty more had broken away and fled during the fighting. His gaze following Zaltys down the gorge, the Chaplain saw that two more Space Marines had also been killed by the orks.

It was not much compared to what he had started with, but it was probably enough to see off the dregs of the ork army that had survived the last attack. The power plant's defenders still had the advantage of higher ground and a prepared position.

'Surviving officers, report to me for fresh dispositions,' Boreas announced.

Two officers picked their way wearily through the bodies and destroyed barricades. A third was pointing to the west, towards the right flank. The man turned back to Boreas with a horrified expression, his peaked cap falling from his head.

'Master Boreas! Orks!'

Boreas looked to where the lieutenant was pointing and magnified his view. A massive ork was shouldering its way through a stand of trees and bushes at the far end of the line. Encased in a solid suit of yellow armour decorated with black flames and glittering gold, the warlord was accompanied by half a dozen monstrous orks and twenty smaller greenskins.

The Chaplain quickly realised what had happened. Obscured by the rocks and foliage was another narrow defile running almost parallel to the main gorge, up to the outskirts of the power plant. Glancing down the gorge, Boreas could now see where the rocks parted at the far end. It appeared that the earlier screen of smoke and dust had not been to obscure the main ork advance, but to allow the warlord and a small entourage to slip unseen into the crevasse. The subsequent attack had drawn more and more of the defenders away from the flank and now there was nobody to stop the warlord and its bodyguard sweeping in behind the emplacements.

'Zaltys, return to the line!' Boreas snapped. 'Enemy flank attack. Engage immediately.'

'Sir, the orks are coming back,' a sergeant called from Boreas's left.

The Chaplain turned around to see the greenskins that had been hurled back gathering again in the rocks and bushes on the left flank. Boreas hissed in irritation as it dawned on him that he had been out-smarted by a greenskin.

'It's not over yet, you green-skinned filth,' the Chaplain growled. He switched his helmet vocaliser to maximum amplification, voice booming out across the gorge. 'Man your weapons! Take up your rifles! This battle is not lost. Destroy the foes of the Emperor!'

'We're trapped,' murmured one of the lieutenants beside Boreas.

The Chaplain rounded on the officer, skull helm a hair's breadth from the lieutenant's shocked face.

'Then you have nothing to lose by fighting, do you? Rally your men!'

Quivering and gulping, the officer backed away, shouting for his command squad with a broken voice. Past him, Boreas saw Zaltys's squad racing back up the gorge, bounding over the rocks and rubble.

The orks split. A mob of black-clad greenskins wielding pistols and jagged

blades broke into the power plant while the heavily armoured warlord and retinue turned to confront the approaching Assault Marines. The warlord raised its right arm, which ended with a multi-barrelled cannon. Smoke plumed from the exhausts of the warlord's armour as the barrels started to spin. Around their leader, the bodyguard also lifted an assortment of outlandish energy weapons and rocket launchers.

The warlord bellowed a command and the orks opened fire. The leader's weapon spewed a hail of projectiles that glowed with a green light, the salvo rippling across the Assault Marine squad as they sprang up the slope. One of Zaltys's warriors was engulfed by the fusillade. Mid-leap, his jump pack exploded, sending the Space Marine tumbling into the rocks as pieces of his shoulder pads and chest plastron flew in all directions. Several rocket trails hissed past the leaping Space Marines to explode further down the gorge, while pulses of plasma screeched through the squad like miniature stars.

Zaltys crashed down onto the rocky ground, took three paces and jumped again, soaring high above the warlord. Behind the sergeant, the Assault Marines opened fire, flickering bolts and more plasma shots slamming into the ork bodyguards.

With a clang that resounded from one side of the gorge to the other, Zaltys descended feet-first into the chest of an armoured ork, sending it reeling. The Assault sergeant's hand flamer engulfed the greenskin from waist to shoulder. The huge bodyguard ignored the flames licking up its armour and swung a glittering axe at Zaltys, the blade crashing into the sergeant's right arm.

Boreas had to look away as a shout from the troopers reminded him of the orks surging back up the gorge. The Chaplain glanced back to Zaltys and realised there was nothing he could do to intervene as the Assault Marines and orks set upon each other with roaring chainswords and deadly power claws.

'Hold the flank!' Boreas shouted at the defence troopers. 'Fire at will.'

Las-fire and bullets raced past each other as the orks closed on the Piscinans. Autocannons and heavy bolters punched gaping holes through the attacking greenskins, but the orks were filled with a wild desperation.

Boreas realised that this was the warlord's last gambit. If the orks could be held back now, the enemy had nothing else to offer. The Chaplain sought out one of the Piscinan lieutenants, a craggy-faced man shouting orders whilst crouched behind a pile of empty cable reels. Boreas hauled the lieutenant to his feet.

'Fight to the last, victory is at hand,' the Chaplain snarled. 'Give every drop of blood for the Emperor.'

The lieutenant nodded, lifted his chainsword above his head and bellowed for

his command squad to follow as he leapt over the barricade into the orks. Boreas fired a few more rounds from his pistol into the greenskins tearing up the slope and looked back to check on Zaltys.

Two of the bodyguard had been felled by the Assault Marines, but at the cost of four of their number. The sergeant was still alive, battering at the chest of an ork with his power fist. To his left one of the battle-brothers was gripped around the throat by a power claw, firing his pistol into the ork's face. The two combatants fell together, the Assault Marine's legs sticking out from under the massive bodyguard as it toppled onto him.

Zaltys grabbed a piece of torn armour and wrenched it away from his adversary, exposing the ork's chest. As the sergeant raised his glowing fist, the warlord loomed up through the melee behind him, crackling claws spread wide.

'Zaltys, behind you!' Boreas said over the comm.

The warning came too late. The claw snapped shut as Zaltys turned, razor-sharp tines slicing through the sergeant's head in a spray of shattering eye lenses, ceramite and skull.

The one surviving Assault Marine launched himself at the warlord, hacking with his chainsword. The ork raised up a steel-clad arm to ward away the blows and fired its cannon, the hail of shot ripping through the Space Marine's abdomen. Stooping, the warlord reached into the ragged wound and lifted the Space Marine up. Spitting blood, the Assault Marine drove the point of his chainsword at the ork's face but the whirring blades missed as the warlord shook the Space Marine from side to side.

The Assault Marine flopped as his spine snapped. With a bestial roar, the warlord lifted its trophy high and then brought down its arm, smashing the Space Marine's corpse into the hard ground.

'They're falling back again,' reported the aging lieutenant. The officer clambered back over the barricade, a ragged cut across his nose and cheek, face smeared with blood. His command squad all lay dead amongst the pile of ork bodies further down the gorge.

Boreas looked down the slope and saw that it was true. The greenskins had been shot and cut down before they reached the barricades and the few that had survived were running back to the administration building with plaintive wails.

'Good work,' said Boreas. He pointed to the warlord. The greenskin was striding across the gorge flanked by two remaining bodyguards. 'Target your heavy weapons on these brutes. Detail the rest to watch the power plant. At least twenty ork infantry are inside.'

Wiping the blood from his mouth, the lieutenant nodded and yelled orders at the remaining troopers. There were less than thirty left. They manoeuvred the remaining heavy weapons to point across the gorge towards the approaching warlord: two heavy bolters, the same number of autocannons and a single lascannon could be salvaged from the remains of the Piscinans' arsenal.

'Target to the front. Open fire!' The lieutenant brought down his chainsword as he bellowed the order.

The harsh blast of the lascannon cut through the air, passing over the warlord's head. In response, the air bucked and crackled around the small group. A reddish aura surrounded the orks, wavering and indistinct. A volley of autocannon rounds slammed into the field. Boreas could see the shells slowing as they passed through the insubstantial barrier; some fell short and impacted the ground in front of the advancing orks; others skewed off-course and passed by without hitting. The few that remained on target had lost so much speed they bounced harmlessly from the orks' thick plates of armour.

The lieutenant looked over at Boreas, despair written in his features.

'Keep firing,' Boreas said, dividing his attention between the advancing warlord and the shadows of the power plant. The Chaplain relaxed his grip on the haft of his crozius and forced himself to speak calmly. 'Try to overload their shield.'

'Pour it on, men,' snarled the officer.

The force field flared and roiled around the greenskin entourage, becoming more visible with every heavy bolter round, autocannon shell and lascannon blast that hit it. Energy rippled and wreathed from each impact, sending sparks leaping into the air.

The pounding of feet drew Boreas's attention to the blocky transformers of the power plant. The black-clothed orks stormed out of the shade, firing their pistols and grunting battle cries.

'Small arms, engage enemy to the right,' Boreas told the bloodied troopers around him. 'Heavy weapons, continue to target the warlord's retinue.'

The orks' force field was fizzing madly, a dome of constantly writhing bolts of red electricity that encapsulated the warlord and his bodyguard. Smoke and steam billowed in thick clouds from the warlord's engine as the field generator struggled to hold back the Piscinans' cannonade.

'That's it, keep on them,' said the lieutenant. 'We've almost got them.'

Las-fire crackled from Boreas's right as the defence troopers engaged the orks emerging from the power-plant structure. He saw several shots hitting home, but

the orks shrugged off their wounds and continued onwards, ignoring holes in their flesh and burning wounds across their skin.

'Power pack's dead, sir!' bawled the lascannon gunner. 'No more shots, sir.'

The Piscinan lieutenant cursed and waded into the mess of crates and boxes littering the emplacement, looking for fresh power cells.

'Belay that nonsense,' Boreas barked at the officer. The Chaplain turned on the Piscinans manning the lascannon and pointed towards the orks in the geothermal plant. 'Find yourselves lasguns and secure the power station.'

As the troopers snatched up rifles from the hands of the dead, Boreas focussed his attention back to the warlord. A few seconds later, when the hulking aliens were less than fifty metres away, the warlord's field collapsed with a huge blaze of energy that spiralled rapidly around the orks before flickering into nothing. Immediately, the greenskins brought their own weapons to bear.

'Take cover,' warned the Free Militia officer.

A rocket sped into the emplacement to explode against the barricade, showering the cowering men with shards of metal and splinters from the piled crates. An autocannon loader fell back with a jag of wood jutting from his eye. His gunner turned in surprise and reached out to the screaming man. Boreas loomed over the pair of them.

'Attend to your weapon, trooper,' said the Chaplain. The Piscinan looked up at the battered skull helm of Boreas, nodded dumbly and returned to the autocannon.

A blaze of phosphorescent bullets engulfed Boreas. Each projectile had its own shimmering field and punched into his armour, cracking plates as if they were made of brittle porcelain. Something buried itself in the Chaplain's right bicep, stinging like a giant wasp. Pockmarks opened up across his chest and shoulder pad, pieces of ceramite splitting away and falling to the ground like artificial hail.

'Lion's shade,' he swore. Boreas's arm had barely healed from the injury suffered at the basilica. He was sure the bone had not suffered any further damage, but he found it hard to move the fingers of his hand. His pistol felt fat and heavy in his grasp.

The Chaplain glanced at his chest, wondering why the rosarius hadn't protected him. He saw a small crack in the ruby power crystal.

'He has not forsaken me,' the Chaplain muttered. '*Imperator fortis exalta.* My soul is my armour.'

Another rocket screamed past the barrier, catching the lieutenant in the

shoulder. An epaulette flew into the air as the officer was hurled backwards. The lieutenant sat up groggily and peered at the rocket lying next to him, a few desultory sparks popping from its propellant. The Piscinan picked up the projectile with a laugh.

'It didn't go o–'

The lieutenant's relief was cut short as the rocket exploded, ripping off his hand and sending shrapnel into his eyes. He fell back, face a bloody mask, lips and nose torn apart, burnt skin peeling away.

There were bullets whizzing at Boreas from his right. Without looking, he knew that the orks had broken out of the power plant and swept away the troopers. He pointed his bolt pistol towards the geothermal station and fired the remaining seeking bolts, letting them loose in a single burst while his eyes were fixed on the warlord stomping closer.

The towering greenskin lumbered onwards, armour pistons wheezing, heavy booted feet thudding into the packed earth. Boreas tossed his empty bolt pistol aside. With his free hand, he reached up and unsealed the clasps of his helm. He lifted the helmet away and hung it on his belt, fixing the greenskin with his stare.

The warlord met his gaze, his rubbery lips turning up at the corners in a grimacing smile. The ork said something and nodded, waving its bodyguards back with its claw. The beast lifted its right arm sideways. Mechanical clasps hissed and the multi-barrelled cannon dropped to the ground with a clang.

Boreas waited for the monster in a crouch, crozius held in both hands. He spat, though his mouth was dry. The opening verse of the Litany of Devotion sprang to mind. He began to whisper the words, his voice growing in strength as the warlord heaved itself in Boreas's direction.

'Where there is uncertainty, I shall bring light. Where there is doubt, I shall sow faith. Where there is shame, I shall point atonement. Where there is rage, I shall show its course.' Boreas broke into a run, crozius ready. 'My word in the soul shall be as my bolter in the field!'

His first blow deflected off the ork's upraised claw. The Chaplain ducked beneath the swinging fist and smashed the blazing head of the crozius arcanum into the engine block upon the warlord's back.

'Never forget!' Boreas growled, sending an exhaust pipe spinning away with a swing of his crozius. 'Never forgive!'

As the warlord stumbled around to face Boreas, the Chaplain continued to rain blow after blow against the monstrous ork's armour, buckling and ripping the metal plates.

‘*Impudianta xenos, mortia et indignatia!*’

He could hear the chime of his comm from his helmet but ignored it and slammed the head of his crozius into the warlord’s chest. The Chaplain raged as his relentless assault continued, every spat word punctuated by a blow from his weapon.

‘Suffer… not… the… unclean… to… live!’

The ork punched out with its claw, driving into Boreas’s gut. The Chaplain stumbled back, his crumpled, torn armour biting into the muscles of his abdomen. The serrated toe of the warlord’s boot connected with the Chaplain’s chin, slamming him to his back. The ork’s face twisted in a feral snarl, heavy brows knotted deeply above its piercing red eyes. Thick blood streamed from the corner of its mouth.

Boreas’s jaw was broken, his teeth shattered. He couldn’t speak, could no longer give voice to his rage and hate. The warlord placed a foot on the Chaplain’s chest, pinning him down. Armour creaked and bent under the ork’s weight as it bowed forwards to look Boreas in the eye.

Boreas spat in the ork’s face.

It was no meaningless act of defiance: the Space Marine’s saliva was laced with an acidic compound from the Betcher’s Gland implanted beneath his tongue. The ork recoiled, skin burning and bubbling. Boreas pushed himself to his feet and stepped forwards.

The ork warlord lashed out blindly. Boreas saw the blow coming and raised his crozius to parry but he was too weak to deflect it. The crackling claw swept aside the Chaplain’s weapon and crashed into the side of his head.

Thunder roared in Boreas’s ears. The world spun. The ground rushed up to meet him.

Everything went silent and dark.

# THE TALE OF BELIAL

## COUNTER-ATTACK

The operations room aboard the *Unrelenting Fury* was silent but for the hiss of the command comm. Master Belial looked at the speaker intently. He was dressed only in a ceremonial robe, his armour left with the Techmarines to repair the damage sustained during the retrieval of the ork power relay. Half-healed scars from his encounter with Ghazghkull marred his exposed chest and arms, bright welts against tanned skin.

Occasionally the static was broken by a background thump or muffled impact. The company captain blinked in surprise as a deafening crash resounded around the room.

'Boreas?' The captain's repeated call brought no reply. 'Brother Boreas, this is Master Belial.'

He listened for a response but there was nothing. Belial crossed to the control panel set into the wood-panelled wall and was about to cut the link when he heard a loud panting. Guttural voices could be heard in the distance.

'Brother-Chaplain Boreas? Respond. Report your situation.'

There was a scraping noise and more panting. Suddenly a bass voice echoed from the speakers.

'Dey's all dead.'

Deep laughter reverberated around the room. Then came a crash and the link died.

Belial sighed and turned the comm dial to general broadcast.

'This is Master Belial to all forces. Barrak Gorge geothermal station has fallen to the orks. It is likely the enemy will recommence teleportation reinforcements in the near future. All stations prepare your defences and stand ready for attack.' The commander adjusted the setting. 'This is Master Belial to Ravenwing

Sergeant Validus. Join me aboard the *Unrelenting Fury*. I am sending a Thunderhawk to your position.' He twisted the dial again without waiting for a response. 'Brothers Uriel, Hephaestus and Charon, rendezvous at Sergeant Validus's position for transportation to orbit.'

He stepped away from the comm panel and crossed to the holo-desk that dominated the centre of the chamber. The affirmatives from his warriors sounded tinnily from the comm behind him. Punching in coordinates, Belial brought up a fuzzy display of Koth Ridge and the East Barrens. Red icons blinked here and there, showing the last recorded sightings of ork forces. He brought up the chronometer tags and sighed again. Other than those inside Kadillus Harbour, the latest report was Boreas's. The only others were his own observations at the East Barrens station, now six hours old. He peered at the digital image as if he might see the orks on the planet below.

'Where are you?' he asked quietly, rubbing his chin. 'What are you going to do next?'

The Company Council was convened within the hour. Belial had stared constantly at the digimap while he had waited for his advisors, but was no closer to deciding a course of action. He sat now at the head of the display desk, elbow on one arm of the command throne, chin on fist.

Uriel sat on the master's left, his black armour covered by a sleeveless bone-coloured robe. His sunken eyes constantly flicked across the faces of the others in the room.

On Belial's right was the most senior Librarian in the force, Lexicanium Charon. Though of the lowest rank within the Librarium, Charon was attached to the 3rd Company as Grand Master Azrael's representative and no doubt had the ear of the Dark Angels' supreme commander. The psyker sat upright, palms together in his lap, eyes intent on Belial. The cables of Charon's psychic hood burrowed beneath the skin of his scalp and twitched with the Librarian's pulse, scratching against each other with every double heartbeat.

Beside the Librarian hunched Ravenwing Sergeant Validus, the longest-serving member of the 2nd Company present on Piscina. The black paint of his armour was heavily scratched and burnt, the ceramite underneath patched with fresh resin casts and welding. His winged helmet was on the table in front, an eye lens cracked, mouth-grille dented.

Last of those present was Techmarine Hephaestus, representative of the armoury. He looked strangely smaller than the others, having removed his servo-

arm-equipped backpack and heavy shoulder pads. The Techmarine was at the display console's controls, three cables snaking from the digi-desk to sockets in Hephaestus's forearm armour.

'There is another whose advice will be invaluable,' announced Belial. He signalled to the robed serf sat at the comms unit. 'Revered Venerari, can you hear me?'

A mechanically generated voice grated from the comm speakers.

'I am here, brother. My experience is yours to share.'

'Thank you, brother. Soon we will need not just your wisdom, but your strength and determination.' Belial stood up and leaned on the edge of the large display plate, looking at each of his council in turn. 'We face a tipping point in this war, brothers. We have held the orks at bay as best we can, but it may not be enough. It is still at least seven days before the rest of the Chapter will reach orbit. The orks have control of two power stations once more and will resume their previous level of reinforcement. Though we have bloodied our foes severely these last eight days and nights, we have no such reserves to draw upon. Casualties amongst the 3rd Company and other Astartes units under my command are at thirty-two per cent. The Piscina defence force reports nearly seventy per cent casualties, mostly in Kadillus Harbour.'

Belial stepped back and folded his arms across his broad chest.

'We do not know exactly how quickly the orks can rebuild their strength for sure, or how soon they will attack, but we can be sure that the longer they wait, the greater will be the blow that lands upon us.'

'Are all forces engaged, brother?' Venerari asked through the chamber's speakers. 'Have we any other forces left to commit?'

'There are Free Militia troops and tanks en route to Kadillus Harbour from other parts of the island,' replied the company master. 'We might have airlifted them to the city earlier, but the enemy's possession of the defence laser rendered that impossible. Similarly, Ghazghkull's occupation of the docks makes any transportation by sea equally difficult. Therefore these forces are travelling overland and will be expected in two days' time.'

'It is your hope that these forces will bolster the defence before the orks attack.' Charon's words were a statement not a question. 'It is unwise to rely upon elements that are not directly under your control.'

'And I do not intend to, brother,' said Belial, sitting down again. 'If we simply wait for the orks to build up their strength, we cannot stop them. They could grow in numbers for five days and have the far greater strength, sweeping away

any forces we have in a day, before the Chapter reaches us.'

'Perhaps the orks will attack early,' suggested Uriel. 'Excited by their success at Barrak Gorge they might continue their attack.'

'Possible, but unlikely,' said Venerari. 'We know that Ghazghkull has demonstrated remarkable strategic acumen for an ork in the past, and his actions thus far have not demonstrated proof that he has lost that. This other warlord has also shown a certain amount of cunning.'

'Indeed,' said Belial. 'It is to my shame that I underestimated the threat of the orks, and perhaps by doing so I have allowed them an advantage that we cannot now reverse.'

'From what Naaman described, none of us could have imagined how the orks were reaching the planet,' said Uriel. 'You acted in accordance with the best teachings and doctrine of the Chapter. What we have faced is quite unprecedented. Not only have two ork warlords allied themselves to attack this world – which is in itself a strangely inconsequential target – but they have also mastered an advanced technology on a scale never before encountered in the ten thousand years of the Chapter. I am sure that Grand Master Azrael will not judge your actions harshly.'

Belial turned to Sergeant Validus.

'Have the Ravenwing any fresher intelligence to offer this discussion?' asked the captain.

'No, brother, not at the moment,' Validus replied with a shake of the head. 'I have but three land speeders and a single bike squad left for reconnaissance, to cover several hundred square kilometres, and without orbital augury data. If you were to tell me where to look for the orks, we will do so, but we cannot patrol the wilderness endlessly or with any certainty.'

The company master chewed on the knuckle of his thumb as he considered this. His eyes darted to Uriel as the Chaplain sat forwards, hands on the wide table.

'You could lead another Terminator strike at the East Barrens site,' declared the Chaplain. 'It is not a permanent solution, but it would delay ork reinforcements again and generate time for us to better prepare our defences.'

'Or mount an offensive to retake Barrak Gorge,' added Validus.

Belial shook his head.

'The last attack was only possible due to Naaman's planting of the homing beacon. It has been destroyed.' He looked at Validus. 'Unless the Ravenwing are capable of planting a new homing signal transmitter?'

Validus shrugged.

‘It is worth investigation, brothers,’ said the 2nd Company sergeant. ‘Sergeant Naaman succeeded through stealth; perhaps we will meet with similar success with speed.’

‘It is a delaying tactic and nothing more, brothers,’ said Venerari. ‘It is not without merit but it is not a lasting solution to the situation that we face. It may succeed again, but I do not believe that the orks will be tricked a third time. We would still require a more permanent resolution if we are to resist their attacks until the rest of the Chapter arrives.’

‘If it is even possible a second time,’ said Hephaestus. ‘It is likely the enemy have further fortified their base since the last attack. I rate the chances of a Ravenwing strike to be slim considering the likely level of opposition.’

The Space Marines sat in silence for some time, amidst an air of frustration. It was galling to Belial that he had been wrong-footed by two savages. He wracked his brains to find some other strategy that would turn the tide back against the greenskins.

‘May I make a suggestion, brother-captain?’ Hephaestus broke the thoughtful silence.

‘That is why I brought you here, brother,’ Belial replied with some irritation. ‘Speak your mind.’

‘While it seems problematic to prevent the ork reinforcements from arriving, there is another alternative,’ said the Techmarine. The holo-display whirled and zoomed in on the East Barrens geothermal station. ‘We have a single point of entry to target. Now that we have the precise energy signature from Sergeant Naaman, we have been able to locate the teleporter beam on the long-range scanning arrays. It has not moved from its previous site. It is a logical conclusion from the evidence so far examined that the orks’ arrival point on-world is fixed, for some reason we do not yet understand.’

‘We don’t know where the orks are that are here already, but we can be sure where any new arrivals will be coming from.’ Belial smiled at the realisation.

‘An orbital strike,’ suggested Uriel.

‘Negative,’ said Hephaestus. ‘Proximity to the power plant still presents a threat to the entire geothermal network.’

‘Thunderhawk strike,’ said Venerari. ‘A gunship can deploy from orbit, attack the reinforcements and then return to the battle-barge to resupply and re-arm.’

Belial’s fingers tapped an agitated beat on the desktop.

‘We have only one gunship remaining,’ said the commander. ‘If we lose it, we have only civilian aircraft left to us.’

‘That is where the Ravenwing will help,’ said Validus. ‘I can have a squadron of land speeders in the area within three hours. They can report on the enemy’s defences and any changes since we lost touch with Naaman.’

‘Very well,’ said Belial, standing up. The others stood with him. ‘We will prepare for a succession of aerial strikes. Sergeant Validus will coordinate the reconnaissance and provide on-ground observation for the attack. Brother Hephaestus, prepare the remaining gunship for a heavy-bombardment role. Brother Uriel, draw up a list of surviving battle-brothers with specialist gunnery training who can crew the Thunderhawk with Hephaestus. I will organise for them to be extracted from their current duties.’

The Space Marines nodded their assent. As Validus, Hephaestus and Uriel left, Charon stayed behind.

‘You have something to add, brother?’ Belial asked the Librarian.

Charon sat down again and nodded.

‘I detected an emanation from my brothers in the Librarium shortly before I arrived at the council.’ The psyker fixed Belial with a penetrating stare. ‘It is a message from Grand Master Azrael. I thought it better that I pass it to you in private.’

‘Very well,’ said Belial. He gestured for the Librarian to continue.

Straightening in his chair, Charon laid his hands flat on the glassy surface of the display table. Motes of energy danced along the wires of his psychic hood. The Librarian’s eyes darkened, the veins standing out in stark contrast to the whites, flickering with blue. With a shuddering gasp, the Librarian arched his neck and his eyes rolled back, showing nothing but a tracery of coruscating energy.

The psyker’s face changed. The features did not alter, but the Librarian’s muscles twitched and took on a different cant, approximating another’s face: Azrael, Grand Master of the Dark Angels. The jaw was set firmly, lips thin, cheeks drawn in. When Charon spoke, it was with the voice of the Chapter’s commander, his mouth twisting in imitation of Azrael’s mannerisms.

‘Master Belial. I do not have to press upon you the importance of the situation on Piscina. Know that it is my will that this world is denied to the orks, *at any cost*. I have faith in you and your company, and you should know that deliverance from these foul beasts is almost at hand. The Techmarines believe they have identified an area of space that is the source of the teleportation beam bringing reinforcements to the planet. It is my belief that at least one ork-occupied hulk is in the system, and carries forces that will test the strength of the entire Chapter. The orks must not be allowed to gain a significant hold on

Piscina. If your best efforts and greatest sacrifices are not sufficient to contain the alien menace, it is imperative that the orks be denied a landing in true strength. I trust that you will take any measures to ensure this.'

Azrael-Charon's face turned away for a moment and then returned its unearthly gaze to Belial.

'You will receive confirmation of these orders by standard communication before my arrival. Praise the Lion.'

Shuddering again, Charon let out an explosive breath and slumped forwards. Opening his eyes, he looked at Belial with his normal face.

'I take it from your expression that you comprehend the intent of the Grand Master's command,' said the Librarian.

'I do, brother,' Belial replied with a nod. 'It is better that Kadillus is destroyed than fall into the hands of our enemies.'

'Very well, brother,' Charon said. He stood up and bowed his head in deference. 'I will leave you to make the necessary preparations for that event, and the means by which we might avoid it.'

Belial's eyes followed Charon's back as the psyker left through the heavy door. A blinking light on the comm panel attracted his attention.

'You heard that, Revered Venerari,' said the company master.

'I did, brother.'

'Why is it that he felt it necessary to remind me of my duty?'

'Do not take it as an admonishment. Lord Azrael wishes you to know that you have his full support for whatever actions you take.'

'We will not fail. We are Astartes.'

'The Lion is with us, brother. In his name we will triumph.'

The light winked out and Belial was left with the comms-tech. The youth, his face impassive, turned to the captain.

'Do you have any further orders, master?'

Belial thought for a moment, fingers stroking his chin.

'Send for the gunnery captains. They have preparations to make.'

Half a dozen serfs bustled around the terminals of the operations chamber, moving from one console to the next as they calibrated the comms arrays and updated the scanner data for the digimap. Belial stood immobile amongst the activity; now clad in his dark green armour, power sword at his waist, an ivory-coloured robe hanging to his knees, red Deathwing icon embroidered upon the left side of its chest. Charon and Uriel were with him, sitting patiently at the

display slate.

Through the murmurings of the serfs Belial could hear the reports from the ongoing fighting in Kadillus Harbour. The company commander listened subconsciously to the fragments of information being related by the Space Marines and Piscinan officers around the docks and power plant, content that nothing had significantly changed. He had issued orders for the Emperor's forces to hold their positions and continue to contain Ghazghkull's army so that he could devote his full attention to the upcoming Ravenwing mission.

Now and then he delivered a short series of orders into the comm-piece hung on the collar of his armour: directing squads to areas that were weak, or replacing fatigued troops with fresher forces. He did this without effort or reference to the digimap, his conscious thoughts contemplating the situation at the East Barrens plant.

Validus's voice cut through the others from the main speaker.

'Five kilometres from target.'

'Filter all other transmissions,' said Belial as he sat down in the command throne.

He shared a glance with Charon and Uriel. All three turned their attention to the holo-display. A flickering rune denoting the land speeder squadron moved across the representation of Kadillus east of Koth Ridge.

'Activating long-range augur. Ravenwing-Two, increase separation to one hundred metres. Sequenced upload of scan data commencing.'

The hololith strobed for a few seconds, the rendered topography of Kadillus warping as the stream of data was integrated into the display. When the image had settled Belial could see several clusters of fresh runes dotting the hillside ahead of the land speeder squadron.

Timing was the key. The Ravenwing squadron had three tasks to complete: locate the enemy forces around the landing site, provide on-ground targeting links for the Thunderhawk attack, and engage the air-defence weapons that had shot down the company's other gunship.

'Belial to Hephaestus. Launch gunship and begin atmospheric descent.'

'Confirm, brother-captain,' replied the Techmarine. 'Launching in five seconds. Attack route established. Weapons armed.'

'Scanner returns increasing in density.' Belial could sense the tension in Validus's voice. 'Identification problematic. Whatever the orks have done to the power station, it is causing havoc with the augur. Ork vehicles present, category unknown. Visual confirmation required.'

‘Gunship launched, brother-captain,’ said Hephaestus. ‘Decreasing orbital velocity to six kilometres per second. Gravitic grip deployed. Atmospheric breach in three minutes. Time at target will be eighteen minutes.’

Two metres above the digital surface of Piscina, a small icon representing Hephaestus’s Thunderhawk appeared. It hovered in the air, far too distant for its speed to be scaled down to the display. Belial touched the comm activation rune on the panel set into the tablet in front of him.

‘This is Belial to Validus. Gunship is on its way. Update on scanner and comms interference from the ork modifications. Do not engage enemy.’

The commander tapped a finger on the display slate while he waited for his message to relay down to the surface and the Ravenwing sergeant’s reply to return to the battle-barge.

‘Was it wise to launch the gunship before target confirmation, brother?’ said Uriel. ‘There will be little opportunity to abort the mission if there are no–’

Validus’s voice cut through before the Chaplain could finish. Belial held up his hand, silencing Uriel.

‘Interference is resonating from volcanic deposits,’ said Validus. ‘We will have a clearer signal once we clear the ridge. Orders, brother-captain?’

Belial checked the chronometer.

‘We have fifteen minutes until last-chance abort of mission, brother. Enemy must not be alerted to your presence. Cross the ridge in six minutes and provide report. Engage enemy defences in thirteen minutes. Confirm.’ The company commander looked through the translucent hololith at Uriel. ‘If we wait for confirmation, the delay from launch to attack is too long and would allow the orks to respond to the presence of the Ravenwing. Pre-arranged, absolute abort signal is “Angel’s fall” and every member of the squadron is authorised to issue it. Hephaestus will re-direct to Northport the moment that code is issued, without compromise.’

Excitement was growing inside Belial. Though he was not directly involved, he could feel the familiar rush of battle building up. Calling on decades of training and experience, he kept himself calm and held back the urge for action. It was Belial’s patience that had first made him suitable for command, and he needed every ounce of that same patience during this critical mission.

He barely heard Validus’s confirmation message as he considered the possible outcomes and options that would unfold over the next fifteen minutes. Like an actor rehearsing his lines, Belial ran through different scenarios and his responses: what he would do if the ork numbers proved too few to be worthy of

attack; his orders to Hephaestus if contact with the Ravenwing was lost; targeting priorities if there was sufficient enemy presence to warrant the completion of the mission; the threat threshold of enemy defences he considered too much of a risk to the Thunderhawk if Validus deferred the abort option to his commander.

All of this and much more Belial considered and analysed and streamlined so that he would be ready whatever happened. Detached from the action, the stimulants coursing through the captain's system bombarded the neurons firing in his brain rather than flooding his limbs with physical power. Each and every consideration was crisp and precise, analysed in detail and memorised for future recall. Every thought opened up a sequence of possible consequences, which brought on further thoughts. A cascade of decisions, probable outcomes and subsequent decisions filled Belial's mind.

He looked sharply at Charon, his heightened awareness drawn by a slight movement from the Librarian. Charon returned Belial's focussed glare with a calm expression. The Librarian darted a glance at Belial's armoured hands, which were clenched into fists atop the display slab.

Belial's nostrils flared as he took a deep breath. He relaxed his hands, interlocking his fingers in front of him. He smiled at Charon and signalled his gratitude with the slightest dip of his head.

The Master of the 3rd Company looked at the chronometer. Two more minutes had passed.

'Time on target, six minutes,' reported Hephaestus. 'Undergoing atmospheric braking and energy capture. Weapons test arming complete. Awaiting targeting data from the ground.'

Belial checked the holo-display. The Thunderhawk was levelling out of its steep descent and blazing towards the East Barrens at several times the speed of sound. Validus's squadron had encountered scattered ork infantry but had swept through the patrols and were due to crest the ridge above the geothermal plant at any moment. He looked at the comms panel in anticipation.

'Validus to Master Belial. Enemy casualties at sixteen, no friendly casualties. We will achieve unimpeded augur coverage and visual sighting of the enemy in ten seconds. Energy waveform matches that of the teleporter prior to your removal of the relay device, brother-captain. It is reasonable to assume that the enemy have restored their previous level of reinforcement.'

There was a crackle of static, most likely caused by an inter-squad communication.

‘Collate squad comms,’ Belial told the technicians. They fussed at their dials and switches for a few seconds before the voices of the Ravenwing pilots and gunners hissed over the speakers.

‘…earing due east, brother-sergeant. Three enemy light transports heading directly to our position.’

‘What of the air defences, brother?’ This was from Validus.

‘Negative at the moment. Medium-calibre weapons and… Wait! There is something behind the power plant. Moving south-east for a better view.’ The silence made the seconds creep past. ‘What is that?’

Another voice cut through.

‘Sergeant, have visual sighting on a vehicle-mounted rocket battery. Two of them, in that stand of trees eighteen hundred metres north-east.’

The first voice returned.

‘Brother-sergeant! Sizeable missile system located south-east of the geothermal station. Looks to be anti-air capable, but who can say for sure with ork technology?’

More hissing from overlapping comm-frequencies filled the room. Everyone, Space Marine and serf, was frozen in place, awaiting the next report. Hephaestus’s deep voice resounded around the chamber.

‘This is Hephaestus. Weapons armed. Target sighted. Final manoeuvring for attack run. Lock-on in fifty seconds.’

Belial checked the chronometer ag ain. It was twenty-eight seconds until Hephaestus could pull out of his attack run and avoid any defences at the East Barrens plant. He decided against signalling Validus for a decision – by the time the message reached the Ravenwing sergeant and was answered there would only be a few seconds to issue an order to the plunging Thunderhawk. He had to trust Validus’s judgement.

Nothing was said for three seconds and then Validus broke the quiet.

‘Ravenwing-One to Hephaestus. Angel’s fall! I repeat, angel’s fall! Enemy air defence too dense. Abort attack run.’

Belial could imagine the roar of retro-jets firing as the Techmarine hastily altered course. The glowing sigil in the hololith turned sharply as the gunship banked away from the power plant.

‘Hephaestus to Master Belial. Abort code received, abandoning attack run. Redirecting to Northport landing facility. Weapons deactivated. Awaiting further orders.’

A tense silence filled the operations chamber. It was broken by a broadcast from

Validus.

'Ravenwing-One to Master Belial. Enemy are responding to our presence in strength. What are your orders?'

Belial activated the comm in front of him.

'Perform a recon sweep of enemy forces as best you can and withdraw. Take up preparatory position fifteen kilometres west of the East Barrens station and await further instruction. Confirm.'

The company master sighed and looked at Charon. The Librarian's expression gave away nothing of his thoughts. Uriel was gently rapping the knuckles of his gloved hand against the edge of the display desk, a sign of frustration.

'Ravenwing-One to Master Belial. Confirm orders. Withdrawing fifteen kilometres west. Avoiding contact with enemy.'

'So that is the end of that,' growled Uriel. 'What do we do now? Validus has confirmed that the orks have been able to connect the Barrak Gorge power plant to their teleporter and reinforcements have resumed. It is only a matter of time before the orks feel they have enough strength to attack again.'

Belial said nothing. He bowed his head as he thought, avoiding the inquiring gazes of Uriel and Charon.

'You have the Grand Master's orders, brother.' The Librarian's words were quiet but insistent.

Still silent, Belial adjusted the display controls to widen the scope of the hololith, until it showed the huge area encompassing Kadillus Harbour, Koth Ridge, Barrak Gorge, Indola and the East Barrens station. He looked at it for some time, staring at the runes highlighting the last reported sightings and strength of the orks.

He sighed and rubbed his chin. Only now did he meet Charon's purposeful gaze.

'I am not yet ready to concede Piscina to the orks,' said the company captain.

'Then you will prepare for bombardment, brother,' replied Charon.

'Not yet.' Belial shook his head and stood. 'There is still one path we can explore. An aerial assault has been ruled out, but we are not without other weapons.'

Belial spread a hand across the Dark Angel figure emblazoned on his chest plastron.

'Ever since the orks arrived we have been trying to keep the enemy at bay. No more. I see now what we should have done from the outset. We are Space Marines! We are the sharp tip of the Emperor's spear; the cutting blade of the

Emperor's sword. We attack, surely and swiftly, and sweep all before us. Ghazghkull has made us a garrison, a defence force, and we have paid the price for allowing that. No more! We will do what we were trained to do; the purpose for which we were created. We attack!'

He pointed at the ork dispositions on the display, his gauntleted hand passing into the fuzzy hologram.

'While our forces have been stretched thin, we should not over-estimate the strength of the enemy or the concentration of their force. They have been defeated at Koth Ridge and paid a heavy price for their assault. Though Boreas ultimately failed us at Barrak Gorge, the orks suffered there also. We cannot be disheartened by the setbacks we have endured, for the enemy have not had such success that they are guaranteed victory.

'It took the orks several days to build up the army they needed to attack Koth Ridge. If we strike now while they are divided, while fresh forces are still arriving, we can capture the East Barrens geothermal station. I saw for myself the slow progress of their reinforcements. If we cannot shut down the teleporter in its entirety, we can establish a position of strength overlooking their arrival zone and destroy them as they arrive.'

'From where will the forces of this attack come?' asked Charon.

Belial paced.

'We must take a risk. Fresh Piscina defence forces are arriving at Kadillus Harbour in the next few hours. We will give over our positions in the city to these soldiers and create a strike force.'

'What you suggest will weaken the defence of Kadillus Harbour.' As usual, Charon simply stated the facts with no hint of reproach or opinion.

'We will trust to our allies to hold Ghazghkull in place,' said Uriel. 'If done under cover of darkness, there is no reason for the enemy to suspect that our lines have been reduced.'

'Better than that, they will think them strengthened,' said Belial. 'I will contact the commander of the reinforcement column and instruct him to enter Kadillus Harbour with as much show of strength as possible. I cannot imagine that Ghazghkull has a clear picture of what is happening outside the city. The sight of newly arrived troops and a minor offensive will convince the enemy that they are isolated and that we are preparing for the final attack.'

'It is a worthy plan, brother,' said Uriel, growing more animated the more he thought about Belial's course of action. 'When we destroy the ork landing site, we will be free to return to Kadillus and purge the city of the filthy xenos, as we

should have done from the outset.'

Belial directed a sharp look at the Master Chaplain.

'You believe I was overly cautious in my earlier actions, brother?'

'I do not judge your actions with the benefit of hindsight, brother,' said Uriel.

'It sounds as if you do,' replied Belial. 'If you had concerns that I was being somehow timid in my reaction to the ork attack, why did you not speak to me?'

'You misunderstand me, brother,' said Uriel. 'You acted to contain the ork menace in Kadillus Harbour and committed the greater part of the company to that effort. You could have sacrificed the city for the short term so that we might avoid getting divided and embroiled in the desperate stalemate that ensued. It was a choice of priority; neither option was better or worse than the other.'

Clearing his throat, Charon stood up and held out his hands, palms facing his two companions.

'The past is set, the future is not,' said the Librarian. He concentrated his attention on Belial. 'Do you consider this attack to be the best course of action, brother?'

Belial raised his eyebrows in surprise.

'You think that I have concocted this plan simply to avoid the alternative?' The company master sighed. 'I would avoid any cataclysmic solution to the situation by any means that present themselves, but this is not simply a fool's errand. It is our duty to protect Piscina, whatever the cost.'

Annoyed by the suggestion, Belial stalked back and forth a few paces. His eyes fell on Uriel.

'Brother-Chaplain,' said the captain. 'These are your orders. You will remain aboard the *Unrelenting Fury* and take command in my absence. I will lead the attack on the East Barrens plant. If the attack fails, you will order the *Unrelenting Fury* into low orbit to destroy the defence laser site in the city, and also Northport. You will then commence bombardment of the East Barrens facility to destroy the orks' source of power. If this proves insufficient to halt ork reinforcements, you will do the same at Barrak Gorge and, if ultimately necessary, the power plant in Kadillus Harbour. When the Chapter arrives, the orks will be stranded on this world, no matter the cost. Ghazghkull and his filth will not escape again.'

Uriel's brow creased in thought.

'Is there not a high risk attached to orbital bombardment, brother-captain?' said the Chaplain.

'There is,' replied Belial. 'Confirm your orders.'

‘Confirm, brother-captain. I will assume command of the *Unrelenting Fury* and use orbital bombardment to halt all ork reinforcements to the planet.’

Belial rounded on Charon.

‘Do you have any other questions, brother?’

The Librarian pursed his lips as he thought.

‘No, brother. I will join you in the attack on the East Barrens, if you concur.’

‘Your presence will be a great boost to our forces, brother.’ Belial looked at the two of them. ‘We will be victorious, brothers. The Third Company will not be remembered with shame for letting the orks take one of the Emperor’s worlds from his domain.’

He nodded for the Librarian and Chaplain to leave.

‘I have many preparations to make, brothers. I will reconvene the council when I have done so.’

When they had left, Belial sat down in the command throne and took a deep breath. It was a gamble: the lives of his warriors for an uncertain chance of victory. He gazed at the digimap and knew that there was no option; the alternative would simply be a stain upon his honour too dark to bear.

Dismissing his sense of foreboding, Belial focussed the hololith on Kadillus Harbour and started to analyse the disposition of the Imperial forces, looking for areas he could pull out his Dark Angels.

Lumbering servitors with hydraulic lifting arms thudded across the hangar deck carrying boxes of supplies to the waiting Thunderhawk. Their blank eyes stared straight ahead as Hephaestus stood on the gunship’s ramp, directing the loading work with clipped commands in the language of the tech-priests. Slack-jawed, cables and pneumatics puncturing their flesh, the servitors trudged up the ramp to stow their loads while robe-clad serfs amended manifest slates.

Chapter staff from the armoury restocked the gunship’s weapons caches and lockers with extra bolters and chainswords, power axes and flamers, heavy bolters and lascannons. The fighting of the previous days had demanded all of the resources of the battle-barge, but Hephaestus and his attendants had stripped the hold bare of every bolt, power pack and weapon that could be found. Even the non-Astartes crew of the *Unrelenting Fury* had given up their store of lasguns and shotguns and flak armour so that the Free Militia in Kadillus Harbour could be re-equipped.

This was the last of four runs down to the planet that Hephaestus had organised. At Northport, armoury crews were assembling two forgotten Rhino transports

that had been found by the Techmarine on a delve into the deepest storage bays. Some of the long-range comm dishes had been removed from the battle-barge's on-board array to replace the primitive sets the Piscinan commanders had been using, while one of the ship's plasma reactors had been re-routed for several hours recharging fuel cells for sensors and heavy weapons.

As he watched the activity from a balcony above the flight deck, Belial knew that this was his last push for a decisive victory. He was sure of his plan; the alternative was to continue to fight a desperate war of attrition with an enemy who could constantly replace their losses. Defeat was certain if he followed that path.

There was more than simply strategy to recommend the attack to Belial. If the 3rd Company was to fail here, it would not be whimpering and bleeding from a thousand cuts, but in the furnace of battle, taking the fight to the orks. Weaker men would have called it vainglory, but Belial knew better. His Space Marines would fight even harder knowing that they faced victory or death. All of the surviving eighty-two Astartes under his command would rather decide their fate with a daring assault than be forced to fight on beneath the ignominious cloud of inevitable defeat.

The clump of boots on the mesh floor of the balcony announced the arrival of Charon. The Librarian's face was hidden in the shadow of his robe's hood, but his eyes glittered with psychic energy. From a sling across Charon's chest hung a long, double-handed blade; its pommel was a single crystal the size of a Space Marine's fist, fashioned in the likeness of a skull.

Seeing that the loading of the Thunderhawk was almost complete, Belial checked his own wargear. He unhooked the displacer field generator from his belt and inspected the power supply display. Shaped like a knight's shield embossed with the head of a lion, the displacer field contained a proximity detector and compact warp-shift engine. When activated by enemy attack, the device would snap Belial into the warp for a fraction of a second, depositing him back into the material universe unharmed, reappearing a few metres away from the threat. It was an arcane piece of equipment, and despite the constant attention of the Techmarines was temperamental and did not guarantee absolute protection.

A holster attached to Belial's right thigh with magno-clamps held the company commander's bolt pistol, loading with seeking ammunition Hephaestus had scavenged from surviving stores in the catacombs of the basilica in Kadillus Harbour. Three more magazines of the precious bolts were carried in pouches on

Belial's belt. On his left hip he carried a plasma pistol, with a spare canister of fuel for the weapon. On a strap hanging across his chest, the captain carried grenades: fragmentation grenades for clearing out enemy positions, krak grenades for breaking armour and anti-tank melta-bombs.

There was not a foe that Belial could not destroy with these weapons, but he had one more: an ornate power sword. Its hilt and pommel were made in the shape of a gilded dark angel with upraised arms, a miniature copy of the sword extending along the blade, outspread wings forming the crosspiece. Belial drew the weapon from its malachite-studded scabbard and pressed his thumb to the rune upon the angel's chest. The sword thrummed into life, forks of energy crackling along veins of obsidian smelted into the adamantium blade.

It was not simply a weapon, it was a symbol of Belial's authority and experience. Grand Master Azrael had gifted the sword to Belial, bestowing upon him the honour of bearing one of the few relics to survive from ancient – lost – Caliban. As he gazed into the white fire of the sword's power field, Belial remembered the deeds that had earned him that honour.

That had been a fierce battle also; perhaps even harder than the challenge he now faced. His foes had been renegades, traitor Space Marines who had turned their backs on their duty to the Emperor and broken their oaths of loyalty. Their commander, once a company captain like Belial, had fallen to the Dark Angels master, and his army had been torn asunder by Belial's warriors.

Belial could think of no better tribute to the sword than to plunge its blade into the heart of Ghazghkull. The promise of vengeance against the warlord who had brought Armageddon to its knees, despoiled Piscina and threatened Belial's reputation sent a thrill of excitement through the Dark Angel. He would stare into the ork's eyes as it died, just as he had stared into the eyes of Furion as the renegade's life had leaked away through the ragged cut across his throat.

'We are ready,' said Charon, snapping Belial out of his reverie.

The master looked down into the flight bay and saw Hephaestus at the Thunderhawk's controls. The serfs and servitors were clearing the launch deck. Red warning lights flashed and a low siren sounded as the inner doors of the flight deck opened with a hiss of escaping air. Air flowed into the exposed lock, sweeping up scraps of wire and tatters of cloth that had been littering the deck.

'There is another still to arrive,' said Belial.

He left the balcony with a nod to the technicians behind the armoured glass of the launch control chamber. A set of steps led down to the flight deck, their stone worn down by generations of Space Marines. Belial told Charon to board the

gunship and crossed to wait by the main doors leading to the hangar's accessway.

The double doors rumbled open, hauled apart by two gigantic pistons. The decking shuddered as Revered Venerari stepped through, blocking out the light from the corridor. Swaying slightly from side to side, Venerari stomped into the flight bay, his armoured form towering over the company master.

The Dreadnought stood twice as tall as Belial and was as broad. Thick slabs of armour protected the central sarcophagus where the physical remains of Brother Venerari hung suspended in a tank of artificial amniotics. Connected to the massive suit, the Dark Angel walked and fought again, saved from death by the genius of the Apothecaries and Techmarines. Enclosed within his second body of ceramite, adamantium and hardened steel, Venerari was connected to his hydraulic limbs through a mind impulse unit that mirrored the nervous system of a normal Space Marine. The interred veteran sensed the world through augurs and scanners. So he had lived for the last eight hundred and seventeen years, following four hundred and six years as a battle-brother. Unless finally slain in battle, Venerari was to all intents immortal.

For a non-Astartes such a fate might have been terrifying, but for a Space Marine it was not only a great honour, it was an entirely natural extension to a life of battle: one that a Space Marine served enclosed in a suit of armour, connected to his vital systems through the miracle of his black carapace. A normal Space Marine saw and heard the world through his autosenses, and was just as much a machine as a man. The only difference between Belial and Venerari was that the captain could take off his armoured skin.

'Greetings, brother,' said Venerari, his voice grating from external speakers set into the ornately decorated sarcophagus; his vocal cords had been destroyed by the eldar power blade that had almost taken Venerari's life. The artificial voice had no change in pitch or pace, but Belial could still sense the gravitas of the veteran's words.

'I thank you, brother, for joining us in this endeavour. Your might as well as your wisdom will surely bring us victory.'

Venerari lifted up a huge four-fingered hand and a shimmering blue aura surrounded it.

'It will be good to fight the orks again, brother. It is I that must thank you for allowing me the opportunity for fresh glories. The enemy will not live to regret the day they dared the wrath of the Dark Angels.'

Servos and pneumatics hissing and clanking, the metal ringing under his clawed

feet, Venerari strode across the deck and up the ramp of the Thunderhawk. Following behind, Belial raised a fist to Hephaestus in the gunship's command deck and engines whined into life, the noise increasing as it reverberated from the walls of the flight bay.

Belial jogged into the Thunderhawk and slammed his palm into the control stud to bring up the ramp. The gunship shuddered as Hephaestus increased the power to the engines. Easing his way past the bulk of Venerari, Belial made his way to the cockpit and strapped himself into the harness beside Hephaestus. Through the canopy he saw the outer doors of the launch bay opening, vapour forming as the air within the flight deck streamed into vacuum.

The stars were blotted out by the dark silhouette of Piscina IV, the planet's atmosphere glowing to the right with light from the system's star. Day would not dawn over Kadillus for three hours. When it came, it would herald a day that would see bloodshed unmatched by anything the orks had yet witnessed.

The fury of the Dark Angels was about to be unleashed.

Colonel Grautz was waiting for Belial at the edge of Northport's main apron. Landing lights blinked in the pre-dawn dark. As the company master stepped off the Thunderhawk's ramp it closed behind him with a whine. Within a few seconds the craft was already lifting off again, heading for the defence line at Koth Ridge with its vital supplies: though Belial was set on victory in the East Barrens, he would not leave his back unguarded.

The Piscinan commander and his staff gazed in astonishment as Venerari stomped past, the Dreadnought's metallic voice subdued as he talked to Charon who was walking beside him. Belial cut straight across the landing pad and strode up to Grautz.

'Is everything ready, colonel?'

Grautz broke away from staring at the Dreadnought and focussed on Belial. The colonel was in his early fifties, most of his lined face hidden behind a thick salt-and-pepper beard, wisps of grey hair sticking out from beneath a high-peaked cap emblazoned with the Imperial aquila. Grautz held himself straight and was considered tall by normal standards, but his eyes were barely level with Belial's collar. Those dark brown eyes looked up and saw a distorted view of the colonel in the lenses of the master's helm.

'Everything is as you ordered, Master Belial.' Grautz was softly spoken but there was a stolid timbre to his voice. It was his world that had been attacked. 'We launched an offensive through the east docks an hour ago. My troops are

moving in behind a cordon of tanks while your warriors are withdrawing to the east gate. It looks like we've stirred up the orks and they're preparing to retaliate. It's going to be a long day.'

'It will be a short day for some, colonel,' said Belial. 'Let us hope that it is not for too many.'

Grautz grunted and nodded.

'We will keep the orks where you need them,' he said. 'Though we owe the Dark Angels much for what they have done to protect us, Piscina is not without its own men of valour.'

Belial looked into the colonel's eyes and saw them glistening with pride. The captain had no doubt that Grautz would make his men fight to the last if necessary. After the disappointment at Barrak Gorge, Belial was pleased to see that there was someone else on Piscina who understood how important this war had become.

'I have every confidence in your men and your ability to lead them, colonel,' Belial said quietly. 'The Dark Angels know that there is strength in Piscina, and not just on your neighbouring world. For six thousand years we have used your world; today the Dark Angels fulfil the oaths made and pay their part of the bargain.'

'I have an armoured column standing by to follow you to the East Barrens,' said Grautz. 'If you need them.'

Belial shook his head.

'The offer is appreciated, colonel, but not necessary. Your tanks are not fast enough to keep up with our advance. Keep them here in the city in case Ghazghkull makes an attempt to break out.'

'You think that your attack will be so swift?' The colonel made no attempt to hide his doubt. 'There are still orks between Koth Ridge and the East Barrens.'

'There are, colonel, but we do not intend to fight them all,' replied Belial. 'We are Space Marines: strike swift, hard and sure. Our force will cut through the ork army and descend upon the East Barrens like a bolt of the Emperor's ire. Once we have taken the ork landing zone, we will defend it against all attack until the rest of the Chapter arrives. We will have time enough to destroy the orks at our leisure.'

Belial bent forwards and laid a hand on the colonel's shoulder, his other wrapped around the hilt of his blade.

'Today, my ally, you will see why the Astartes are called the sword of the Emperor.'

Exhaust vapours and the rumble of engines filled the air as the Space Marine column lined up on the Indola highway. The dark green livery of the Space Marines' vehicles showed much wear and damage, but on each Rhino transport, Razorback armoured carrier and Predator tank, the Chapter serfs had laboured to repaint the Dark Angels insignia. The white winged sword gleamed freshly from a dozen hulls as dawn broke over the rocks of the East Barrens. A circling vapour trail through the orange-tinted clouds overhead marked the progress of the Thunderhawk.

In the lead Rhino, Belial left his seat and climbed up through the command cupola. He pulled himself up onto the upper hull of the transport and looked back at his company. Heat haze shimmered in the morning chill; grey smoke and billowing vapours hung like a fog about the armoured vehicles, lights carving nebulae in the fume, shadows softened by the strengthening light of the rising sun. The growl of engines brought to Belial's mind the image of a hunting beast waiting to pounce, full of potential energy and terrible ferocity kept in check for the moment.

Hatches popped along the column as the vehicle crews and transported squads emerged to hear their commander's address. Belial drew his power sword and held it aloft, blade glowing in the haze, shining from his polished armour.

'This morning brings us to the day of glory we have been longing for,' he declared. 'For days we have laboured to keep back our wretched foes and have made them pay in blood for every patch of Kadillus that they seek to take from us. Now it is the turn of our filthy enemy to fight for survival.'

He swept his sword down to point eastwards.

'It is to the new day that we attack, a fitting omen for the victory that will be ours. We will strike with the speed of a flashing blade and the strength of a crushing fist. No foe will stand before us and survive; no enemy will elude the ire of our weapons. Warriors of the Third Company, your brothers from the Chapter will learn of our actions today and they will be both proud and sad. Proud, that their battle-brothers fought with such honour and ferocity; sad, that they were not here to fight beside us and share in this great battle.'

Belial sheathed his sword and stalked to the rear of the Rhino, his boots ringing on the hull. His robe flapping in the strengthening morning wind, the captain stood with one hand on his sword hilt, the other resting on the holster of his bolt pistol.

'We fight today with renewed purpose, brothers. Our mission is clear, our enemy known, our objective laid before us. We are the Lion's sons of battle,

raised for war and suckled on bloodshed. Today we fight not simply to fulfil our duty, but to punish those that seek to humble our honour. Today we avenge ourselves against those who have brought discord and anarchy to a world of the Emperor. Today we will give our foes the battle they seek, and teach them the folly of daring the wrath of the Astartes.

'Above all else, remember the traditions of the Lion. We are the First. We are the Dark Angels!'

'For the Lion!' roared the answering cry from eighty throats.

Nodding with satisfaction, Belial returned to the hatch and lowered himself back into the Rhino. He sat in the command position and pulled on his harness, tightening the straps across his chest and waist. Activating the comm panel in front of him, Belial selected the channel set aside for the makeshift force he had tasked with remaining at Koth Ridge to bolster the Piscinan defence.

'Brother Sarpedon, Brother Hebron, Squad Menelauis, Squad Dominus, Squad Annihilus and Squad Erinyes. Detach from column and move to your positions.'

Affirmatives echoed around the Rhino as the nominated Space Marines broke away from the company and moved out along the ridge to mingle with the Free Militia troopers staring with awe and anxiety at the Dark Angels force.

He turned in his seat and tapped the driver, Lephrael, on the shoulder. The Space Marine gunned the engine, the vehicle shaking with unleashed power. From external pick-ups Belial could hear the roaring response from the other vehicles along the road.

Belial switched channel.

'Third Company, advance!'

The column rumbled down the ridge, following the Indola highway, picking up speed as they headed across the plains. Belial's Rhino was at the front of the spearhead, and with him rode Charon and the battle-brothers of the master's bodyguard, Apothecary Nestor amongst them. Behind followed two Predator tanks, twin lascannons in their turrets, heavy bolters mounted on armoured sponsons on each flank of their hulls. Following the heavily armoured Predators came more transports – two Razorbacks with heavy bolter gun turrets, each carrying a combat squad of five Dark Angels, and three more Rhinos with a full squad of ten Space Marines aboard each.

The Ravenwing squadrons – three land speeders and five bikes – surged ahead of the column on either side, following Sergeant Validus. Half a kilometre above, the Thunderhawk completed Belial's force, Hephaestus, Venerari and an Assault squad on board.

Each was represented by a glowing rune on the tactical display to Belial's right. It had been a difficult task to extract his warriors from the front line in Kadillus Harbour but they had managed the withdrawal without alerting the orks to what was happening. Two hours of hectic reorganisation had followed, with Belial reassigning the survivors of reduced squads to new sergeants, and promoting two of the battle-brothers to lead the ad-hoc combat squads being carried in the Razorbacks. Weapons and ammunition had been redistributed as needed, while the Apothecaries and Techmarines had worked their way through the force, treating wounds and repairing armour.

The 3rd Company had suffered, but they remained strong.

Belial was filled with a sense of freedom he had not felt since the orks had fallen upon Kadillus with thunderbolt surprise. The responsibility to protect Kadillus Harbour and the uncertainty of what the orks were up to had weighed heavily upon every decision he had made. All of that was forgotten as the Dark Angels raced down the road towards Indola. He had a force worthy of any commander, and an enemy to destroy. The sudden simplicity of everything was a thrill almost as great as the surge of excitement brought about by fighting a foe face-to-face.

Unseen inside his helmet, Belial smiled.

The Dark Angels swept down from Koth Ridge and were halfway to the Indola complex by mid-morning. The reports from the Thunderhawk and Ravenwing confirmed Belial's expectation that there were no orks directly east of Koth Ridge: the company had an open route all the way to Indola.

The abandoned mine was almost certainly occupied by the orks. Only the day before as Validus's squadron returned to Koth Ridge, the Ravenwing sergeant had detected significant enemy around the half-ruined installation.

Twenty kilometres from the mine head, Belial had to make a decision. The column could leave the highway and move cross-country through the East Barrens, ignoring the ork presence; or the Space Marines could follow the road to its terminus at Indola and clear the orks from the compound.

The first course of action would ensure the column reached the East Barrens intact and as speedily as possible. Belial weighed up whether any time lost in attacking Indola would be compensated by destroying an enemy that would otherwise be left behind his line of advance. With compelling strategic reasons for both attack and avoidance, Belial reverted to his instinct. It gnawed at him to leave an enemy with uncontested control of a position, and it seemed to the

captain that he was simply leaving the orks at Indola for the rest of the Chapter to deal with. If nothing else, destroying them now would save the Dark Angels time later, when the orks might have scattered into the wilderness.

'Master Belial to Brother Hephaestus. Conduct a recon fly-past of the Indola complex and report. Confirm.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. Will commence fly-over in nine minutes. Stand by for report.'

The column sped onwards, tracks biting at the worn surface of the highway, dust trailing behind the armoured vehicles. The morning sky was cloudless and sunshine illuminated the plains as if to provide bright witness to the approaching battles.

'This is Ravenwing-One. Wreckage on the road ahead, two kilometres east of your current position. No enemy detected. Will circle to provide perimeter watch until your arrival.'

The column slowed as it neared the site. Clambering into the command cupola, Belial increased the magnification of his autosenses. Less than a kilometre ahead he saw the tangled remains of two vehicles, one a battlewagon, the other a smaller half-track. From what he could see, they had crashed headlong into each other. The bodies of several orks hung limply from the wrecks.

It looked like a typically clumsy ork accident, but Belial had been tricked by the orks before and was not going to take any chances. He signalled his force.

'Company halt. *Caliban's Wrath* and *Hammer of Judgement* provide flank protection. Transports form up into double column.'

The two Predators slewed off the road and took up positions to either side of Belial's Rhino, their weapons pointing to the north-east and south-east. Behind their guns, the Razorbacks and Rhinos drew up together, shortening the flank of the column.

'This is Belial to Ravenwing-One. Confirm lack of enemy.'

'This is Ravenwing-One. No enemy present. The only orks within a kilometre of here are rotting, brother.'

Given the unreliability of sensor reports on previous missions, Belial remained cautious.

'Advance in formation. Gunners in position, direct weapons for circuit defence.' He switched to the internal comm to speak to Lephrael. 'Advance at twenty kilometres per hour. Divert power to cupola.'

'Confirm, brother-captain.'

The Rhino slowly picked up speed, the other vehicles keeping pace with

Belial's lead. To the left and right, the Predators bumped across the uneven ground, turrets swivelling in arcs from the front to either side, gunners scanning for targets. The servos of the cupola beneath Belial whined into life. Taking holding of the storm bolter mounted on the cupola ring, Belial swung the weapon to each side to check it was moving freely. Behind him, other Space Marines were doing the same, rotating their weapons to cover the convoy in all directions.

As the column neared the wrecks, Belial could see the dust cloud of the Ravenwing bikes off to the left and the blurred black shapes of the land speeders to the right, circling around the crash. Had they detected anything, they would have reported immediately.

'Stop us twenty metres short of the wrecks,' Belial told Lephrael. He kept the storm bolter trained on the twisted vehicles as the Rhino slowed to a halt. Nothing moved. Belial addressed the force. 'No threat detected. Move around the wreckage and reform in rapid-deployment formation on the other side.'

Locking the storm bolter in place, Belial dropped back inside the Rhino, slamming the hatch shut over his head. He returned to his command position as Lephrael turned the Rhino off the highway and ploughed through the dust and grass to avoid the crashed vehicles.

'If I did not know better, brother, I would think that you are showing some nervousness,' said Charon, joining Belial in the cramped front end of the transport.

The captain kept his eyes on the tactical display as the icons shifted around the blockage on the road and fell into a single line again behind the accelerating command Rhino.

'I have made too many assumptions already, brother,' Belial replied once the column was under way again. 'I committed the sin of underestimating our foes at the outset of this campaign; it is not a mistake I will repeat at its conclusion.'

'A good lesson, to be sure, brother, but do not start to second-guess yourself. Doubt leads to hesitation…'

'…hesitation leads to defeat,' Belial finished the maxim. 'Do not be concerned, brother. I am not afraid to take decisive action.'

As if on cue, the comm crackled into life.

'Primary sweep of Indola complex completed, brother-captain,' said Hephaestus. 'Confirm enemy presence. Infantry, fifty to sixty in number. Several field guns of unknown design, hidden in buildings covering the two main gates. Awaiting orders.'

Belial considered his options again in light of this intelligence. There was no way to mask the approach of the Space Marines: the column of dust being left in their wake made sure of that. He had to assume that the guns covering the entrances to the compound had anti-tank capability. That would mean disembarking and attacking on foot, which would slow down the advance even more.

'There is another option, brother,' said Charon.

Belial could not tell whether the psyker had read his thoughts or simply understood him well enough to guess them. He swivelled the chair to look at Charon.

'Make your suggestion, brother.'

'You are not restricted to ground combat,' said the Librarian, lifting a finger upwards.

'The gunship has limited ammunition,' said the commander. 'It might be a waste to expend that resource on this matter and not have it available for the main assault.'

'Brother Hephaestus has more than the guns of his Thunderhawk to commit. Consider a combat drop under covering fire of the column.'

The plan had merit. Belial could draw the ork defenders to the column with a diversionary attack, leaving the enemy vulnerable to a Thunderhawk deployment in the heart of the compound. Caught between the two forces, the orks would be quickly destroyed.

'Very well, brother, it is a bold move and today will be decided by aggression and determination.' He turned back to the comm and signalled the circling Thunderhawk. 'Master Belial to Brother Hephaestus. Have Sergeant Arbalan and Revered Venerari prepare for aerial insertion. Stand by for further orders.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. Awaiting further orders for Thunderhawk insertion.'

Belial nodded for Charon to return to the main compartment. The commander punched in the company channel and activated the comm.

'Pre-battle checks, all squads. Column to assume standard spearhead formation two kilometres from Indola compound. Advance to within five hundred metres and engage enemy forces with all weapons. Squad Arbalan and Revered Venerari will arrive by Thunderhawk into the compound three minutes after engagement commences. Upon completing the insertion, Brother Hephaestus will provide aerial support and column will attack in force. Confirm.'

As the responses of the vehicle crews and squads buzzed back through the comm, Belial allowed his excitement to grow. After so much frustration, and a

night of meticulous, focussed preparation, the 3rd Company would soon shed the first blood of this new battle. Indola would be retaken, next the East Barrens, and from then it would be inevitable that the Dark Angels would control Piscina again.

The guns of the Predators heralded the attack, lascannon beams converging on the brick and metal guardhouses flanking the compound's main gate. Behind the two tanks, the Razorbacks peeled to the left, their turret gunners laying down a curtain of fire with heavy bolters. Belial stood in the Rhino's cupola a few metres back from the Predators, finger resting on the trigger of the storm bolter.

To the right, the Devastators of Squad Vindictus took up a firing position beside the *Hammer of Judgement*, their missile launchers and autocannons directed at the compound. At a signal from their sergeant, the Space Marines opened fire, two missiles streaking away to detonate inside one of the gatehouses while the autocannons punched holes into the brickwork of the other.

Beyond the fence Belial could see orks pouring from the central building, shouting and firing their guns to raise the alarm. Evidently the orks had not been as watchful as the commander had expected. Through the sight of the storm bolter, he followed a whip-wielding ork herding a number of gretchin into a roughly dug emplacement. A few seconds later, the muzzle of a large-bore cannon peeked out through a gap in the dirt heaped around the position.

Belial pulled the trigger, sending a stream of bolter rounds into the emplacement. The bolts sent up a cloud of grit and dirt as they exploded against the wall. The field gun fired, belching flame and smoke, hurling a shell over the *Caliban's Wrath* to explode thirty metres behind the Space Marines. Belial fired again, knowing that he was unlikely to hit anything but the torrent of bolts would interfere with the gretchin gunners' reloading and aim.

The Razorbacks were pouring their fire into the second storey of a half-ruined building halfway along the compound fence. Lethal shrapnel and ferrocrete shards cut through the greenskins sheltering behind the remnants of the wall. With a blaze, a ball of plasma erupted from the building and ripped into the ground short of the closest Razorback. At a warning from their driver, the combat squad within spilled from the main hatch and took up firing from a few metres away.

The guardhouses had been so riddled with fire that nothing could have survived. The one on the left had collapsed, its sheet metal roof trapping any orks that had been inside. Another flurry of lascannon fire from the *Hammer of*

*Judgement* seared through the corroded steel.

'Move on to secondary targets,' Belial told the Predator crews. 'Watch that warehouse to the right.'

The tanks' turrets and sponson guns swivelled to comply with the commander's order. Belial swung the storm bolter around to aim at the orks targeting the Razorbacks, adding his fire to the torrent screaming from the transports' heavy bolters and the guns of the disembarked squad. A pall of dust was enveloping the perimeter of the compound, thrown up by dozens of bolt-round, missile, autocannon and heavy bolter impacts. Belial switched to thermal view to see through the murk and continued firing, targeting the bright glimmers of heat in the ground floor of the building.

Belial's autosenses picked up the incoming roar of jets as the Thunderhawk circled for its final approach. Screaming in from the north, the gunship came to a stop over the compound, hovering on pillars of fire. As the Thunderhawk descended the assault ramp in its prow opened, disgorging the Assault Marines of Squad Arbalan. Jump packs flaring, they bounded away from the landing aircraft, heading towards the other gate.

The cannon Belial had been targeting opened fire. With a clang that could be heard over the mass of gunfire, the shell slammed into the *Hammer of Judgement*'s turret, bouncing away from the sloped front, leaving a deep furrow in the armour. In response, the gunner turned his weapons on the emplacement, twin beams of laser energy stabbing over the mounds of earth sheltering the gun crew. Something erupted into flame and a moment later Belial saw the small greenskins clambering out of the dug-out. They were too late, as the cannon's ammunition exploded, sweeping the entire gate area with flying red-hot metal.

'Attack speed, column advance!'

Dirt spraying from their tracks, the vehicles of the Dark Angels powered towards the compound. The Thunderhawk touched down between the main mine head building and the gatehouses, bullets ricocheting from its hull. Venerari lumbered down the ramp, his power fist crackling, missiles streaking from the armoured pod on his other weapon mount. Fire engulfed the orks as the Thunderhawk lifted off, cruising low over the buildings to bathe the compound with its plasma jets.

'Go left!' Belial snapped to his driver as he saw a group of orks fleeing between the burning buildings of the mine. He jabbed the general comm button. 'Company, follow your commander!'

Lephrael slewed the Rhino towards the greenskins as Belial opened fire. Bolts

ripped past the chainlink a moment before the Rhino crashed through, lurching over the raised plascrete foundation holding the fence in place. The transport rocked and skidded over the stone-strewn ground but Belial compensated for the movement, firing a burst into the retreating orks, cutting down two of them. Behind him the roar of storm bolters echoed from the ruined walls of the compound buildings as the following crews opened up at the orks loitering within.

With a whine of hydraulics, the doors covering the top hatch opened outwards behind Belial. Climbing up to the firing steps, the commander's bodyguard levelled their weapons at the buildings rushing past to either side. Bolts and balls of plasma flew in all directions, while bullets and laser blasts spat back from the orks' guns.

Throwing his weight to his left, Belial brought the storm bolter to bear on a clutch of orks heading into a gap between a rusting storage tank and a thick pipeline. Corroded metal shattered as Belial opened fire. A cloud of rust flakes engulfed the running orks a second before the bolts found their mark, thudding into green-skinned limbs and bodies.

'Purge the unclean!' snarled Belial as he ejected the storm bolter's spent magazine and reached down into the Rhino for a replacement. 'Hunt them all down!'

The snaking column of Rhinos and Razorbacks weaved between the storage sheds, hulking machinery, ore hoppers and ferrocrete hab-blocks, weapons blazing. From just outside the compound, the Predators continued to blast away with heavy bolters and lascannons, levelling any cover that might hide a foe.

Bullets pinged from the Rhino's hull and sprayed from Belial's armour as a mob of orks fired from the windows of a burnt-out tower housing the main pumping works. The angle was too steep for Belial to return fire as the Rhino rumbled past, but it did not matter. The crews of the following vehicles turned their weapons on the greenskins, the hail of fire ripping through the windows and thin walls.

'Brother-captain, this is Hephaestus. There are fifteen-plus orks leaving the compound to the north. Shall I engage?'

'Negative, brother,' Belial replied. 'Sergeant Validus is patrolling that area and will deal with any that try to escape.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. Continuing surveillance sweep.'

The column had reached the open area just west of the main compound building, where a few nights before Sergeants Naaman and Aquila had debated

the nature of the ork threat. Back in the light, Belial switched off his thermal view and swung the cupola around to face the column.

'Perimeter defence. Disembark squads for building clearance.'

He slipped down into the Rhino, Lephrael taking up his commander's position at the gun a couple of seconds later. The command squad dropped down from the top hatch, the doors closing back over them as Belial opened the rear accessway. The company master was first down the lowering ramp, striding out into the bright morning sun. Around him, the Rhinos and Razorbacks formed a circle, guns directed outwards. The thudding of boots echoed around the strangely quiet compound as the squads disembarked. The Space Marines used their vehicles as cover while they aimed their weapons at the buildings around them.

'Tactical squads, clear and secure your sectors. Check for basements, storage bunkers and other hiding places. Squad Vindictus, split into combat squads, remain in reserve to provide fire support. Report strong resistance immediately.'

The Space Marines fanned out across the compound, moving building to building with grenades and bolters. The bark of a gun or crack of frag grenades broke the stillness as the Dark Angels cleared Indola room by room, shack by shack, stone by stone.

Charon joined the company commander while Nestor left the squad to attend to the few Space Marines wounded in the intense fighting. The Librarian said nothing and his silence disturbed Belial.

'You think this is a distraction?' said the captain.

Charon shook his head, his eyes scanning the surrounding buildings.

'I would not presume to think I am better acquainted with strategy. Is there any reason to doubt the wisdom of your action?'

Belial was not sure what the Librarian was implying. The master paced back and forth beside the command Rhino.

'I feel that you are the eyes of Azrael upon me, brother. You profess not to judge me, yet I feel your constant scrutiny. I am aware of the errors I have made and I do not need you to bear witness to them.'

'The interpretation is yours alone and not my intent, brother. Do not feel that you have anything to prove to me, or to Grand Master Azrael.' Charon stopped Belial's pacing with an outstretched hand. 'If there is any judgement, it is yours. If you have doubts, they are of your own fabrication. What accusation do you think I could make regarding this operation?'

Tapping his fingers against the scabbard of his sword in agitation, Belial

directed a long look at Charon. The company master examined his reasoning behind the attack on Indola and could find no flaw – except for a niggling concern that crept into his mind.

'An uncharitable observer might report that I have indulged in this attack to delay the real battle in the East Barrens. This assault could be portrayed as a distraction, conceived to forestall the inevitable clash that will decide my future. Some might say it is a sign that I am fearful of confronting the resolution that awaits us to the east.'

'But that is not the case, brother.' Charon kept his words quiet and glanced away as if dismissing the comment. 'There is a more problematic and direct cause for concern.'

Belial wanted to end the conversation. The Librarian's statements probed at the master's motives and forced him to confront the possibility of failure; or worse, the possibility that Belial would be the cause of defeat. To walk away could be an admittance of guilt. He forced himself to think rationally, pulling back his thoughts from the turmoil of combat so that he could think like a commander.

'The orks are receiving steady reinforcements, and this delay will see their strength increase,' he said. Belial re-examined the strategic options that had been laid before him and continued in a firmer tone. 'While the time spent here will see enemy numbers grow, in balance it is not a factor. If we did not clear the enemy from this area, accepted doctrine says that we should leave a rearguard to protect against attack from this quarter. The growing strength of the orks is an unknowable quantity, while the loss of warriors for such a duty is defined. It is my belief that the benefits of keeping the entirety of the strike force intact outweigh any bolstering of the enemy force.'

Belial checked the chronometer, his agitation subsiding, replaced with renewed confidence.

'I estimate it will take no more than an hour to fully secure the compound. That will leave us with just over eight hours of daylight to reach the East Barrens and prosecute the battle against the ork landing site. Though we are capable of conducting a night operation, it will be better to take the East Barrens station before nightfall to reduce the chances of any orks escaping.'

Folding his arms, Charon nodded.

'You have everything under control, and nothing is amiss in your thinking,' said the Librarian. 'It is important that you recognise this.'

'I do, brother,' said Belial. He stepped up to the command Rhino's entrance hatch but stopped just as he was about to duck inside. He looked back at Charon.

‘How is it, brother, that you see doubts when even I am unaware of them? Is that why Grand Master Azrael attached you to my command?’

The Librarian betrayed no emotion as he replied.

‘I see into men’s souls, brother, but not with any sense you do not possess. The Lion taught that we must know each other if we are to know ourselves. A moment’s hesitation might go unobserved and unremarked, but can be a sign of inner debate. A change of orders or sudden reversal of decision might be a symptom of failing clarity. These things I see, but not in you.’

Belial shook his head in wonder.

‘I am sure that you see more, brother, than you tell me. Has the conflict within me been so plain?’

‘No, brother,’ said Charon, smiling for the first time since he had joined Belial’s company. ‘I saw nothing in you that would suggest doubt or indecision. It is important that you understand that. You are an excellent commander and an outstanding warrior. Believe in your instincts and trust your judgement. They will serve us all well. Grand Master Azrael sent me to you not because he thinks you are weak, but because he thinks you are strong. He believes that you are destined for greater things, Belial, and you have given me no cause to make him question that belief.’

‘Why could you not simply tell me that at the outset? Why leave me thinking the worst for all this time, fearing for a verdict from my masters that was wholly imagined?’

Charon’s smile faded.

‘It is not our place to aggrandise each other, nor to set our sights on goals any loftier than the immediate task at hand. We must test ourselves each day; examine our loyalty, our attention to duty and our dedication to our brothers. There can be no complacency. We both know the dark road that leads from such self-interest.’

The company master glanced around out of instinct, knowing that Charon spoke of the Fallen: the secret that had been entrusted to him as a master and a member of the Deathwing. It was not the time to think about such things. Charon was right: he had more pressing issues to address.

It took a little more than the hour Belial had expected to clear Indola of the remaining orks. It was not the fighting that took up this time; the orks had been rocked by the attack and provided little concerted opposition. The delay came from disposing of the bodies. Hephaestus had insisted that the ork dead be burnt

to ensure they posed no further threat to Piscina, which meant that the corpses had to be gathered up and pits dug for the cremations.

Three black pillars of smoke rose into the midday sky as the Dark Angels headed eastwards. It was unlikely that the orks would see the smoke so many kilometres away, but if they did Belial was not worried. It was his intent to draw into battle as many of the orks as possible so that they could be killed. If the greenskins were allowed to scatter into the wilds, it would make the task of hunting them down all the more difficult and would occupy the Chapter for more time. Better to eradicate them before they bolted for cover, Belial told himself.

So it was that the Dark Angels column rumbled across the undulating grasslands of the East Barrens like a dark green spear aimed at the geothermal station. Hour by hour the Space Marines advanced, no word of the foe from the Thunderhawk overhead or the Ravenwing outriders criss-crossing the plains. Having experienced the rush of battle so recently, the monotony of the journey nagged at Belial and he occupied himself with addressing some of the simple logistical issues involved in the attack.

His force had suffered only two fatalities in the battle at Indola – a Razorback gunner and one of Validus's bikers – and a further seven Space Marines had incurred serious injuries that compromised their ability to fight. Belial had removed these battle-brothers from their squads and split Squad Laetheus to replace them, sending the wounded back to Koth Ridge in the Rhino thus made available. In effect he was one transport and one squad down on his starting force, but Belial considered he would have been forced to sacrifice at least one squad and possibly two as a rearguard if he had not cleansed the orks from Indola.

The attack had used up almost a quarter of the column's ammunition, although at the end the Dark Angels had conserved their resources by using chainswords and fists to destroy the last few greenskins. Supplies had been redistributed between the squads and vehicles to ensure that they were evenly spread amongst the Space Marines.

Heavy bolter rounds were a particular issue, with nearly half of the task force's cache expended during the assault. It was not unexpected: the anti-personnel power and high rate of fire of heavy bolters made them ideal weapons for fighting orks. The two Predators had sacrificed some of their supplies to ensure the squads had enough ammunition. It was a reasonable compromise, as the tanks' lascannons would be more valuable in the coming battle if the enemy had significant numbers of vehicles and Dreadnoughts; the energy weapons were

powered by the Predator's reactor, a near-limitless supply of energy.

Feeling upbeat about the result of the coming attack, the commander turned his attention to events further out. As with the aborted air attack, he composed scenarios of the possible outcomes and what would be needed to deal with each of them. Defeat was not an option he considered. If that happened, Uriel's orders were unequivocal and would be carried out to the letter.

More troublesome in a way was the possibility of a partial victory. The primary objective was to seize the geothermal station from the orks, dismantle their energy relay to stop reinforcements and hold against counter-attack. If it transpired that ork strength was sufficient to stop the Dark Angels achieving this, Belial was determined to set up a point of fire on the landing site so that any arriving reinforcements could be targeted before they could get away. That mission might well last until the Chapter arrived, in at least another four days. Depending upon the scale and frequency of the incoming reinforcements, such an operation would require considerable supplies.

The other unknown was the plan of Ghazghkull in Kadillus Harbour. Belial had no idea whether the warlord had any means of contacting the orks to the east or knew what had been happening outside the city, but it would be foolish to discount the greenskins holding the docks, power plants and defence laser site.

If all went well, the Piscinans could lift their perimeter on Koth Ridge and bolster their defence in the city, freeing the Dark Angels to concentrate their efforts in the east. If only a part-victory was obtained, the defenders of Kadillus would be committed on two fronts, seriously stretching their manpower and supplies. The commander made a note in his tactical log to contact Colonel Grautz to find out what other resources could be airlifted to Kadillus from the smaller islands of Piscina.

Hour-by-hour, kilometre-by-kilometre, Belial engaged himself in this distraction, breaking only to receive the regular, negative reports from the Ravenwing and Hephaestus. It was only at these times that he paid any attention to the chronometer and noted absently the shortening time until the attack would be launched.

At the mark of one hour until engagement Belial pushed his strategic plans to the back of his mind and focussed on the coming battle. Rapid and controlled ferocity would be the key. The Space Marines were masters of shock assault, and the coming confrontation would be a test of those abilities. It was too risky to charge directly in aboard the Rhinos: the orks had rocket systems capable of shooting at aircraft and it seemed reasonable to expect they had at least some

anti-tank weapons positioned around the power station. Those air defences were also a concern in themselves, preventing a Thunderhawk insertion or attack run.

A plan slowly formed in Belial's mind, the vague outlines of what would happen. Five minutes later, he called the column to a halt, thirty kilometres west of the ridge overlooking the geothermal station. He brought the squad sergeants and vehicle commanders together for a mission briefing.

'We will conduct a four-phase assault on the landing site,' Belial told the circle of Space Marines. Hephaestus and Validus listened in over the comm as they continued to circle the column to guard against attack.

Belial held up the dataslab connected to the command terminal in his Rhino and showed them a display depicting the area around the geothermal station. The geography was detailed, based on data taken by Naaman and the Ravenwing in their previous forays into the region. The runes marking out likely enemy dispositions were more approximate, based on old reports but the only information the master had available.

'First phase will be Ravenwing reconnaissance to confirm enemy force and location. Second phase will be a Razorback and Predator strike against anti-air and anti-tank weapons. Third phase will be a general assault to seize key firing positions around the landing site, supported by Thunderhawk attack. Fourth phase will be a narrow-front assault against the station itself, coordinated with an aerial insertion.'

He paused, offering the assembled Dark Angels an opportunity to voice any comment or question regarding the overall plan. Nothing was said. When he continued, his fingers worked the keypad of the dataslab, bringing up lines of attack, arcs of covering fire and other tactical details.

'Most of you fought beside me at Aggreon, and will recall our assault on Forgewell.' There were a few nods from the sergeants. 'The same principles apply here. The key element is establishing a base of fire as soon as possible. Once the Predators, Razorbacks and Devastators are in position, the rest of us can move on to take the main facility.'

Again he allowed any questions to be raised, and again there were none.

'Initial attack formation will be *cohortis rapida* and individual squad deployments will be sent to your tactical displays. After that, it is a matter of how many enemy there are to kill and where we will find them. All non-intra-squad communication will take place on the prime command channel. Facing an uncertain foe, we must be alert and flexible to every opportunity and threat.'

'Withdrawal rally points, brother-captain?' It was Sergeant Livenius that asked

the question.

'There will be no general withdrawal or extraction,' Belial said. 'If we are unable to capture the geothermal station, we will hold any ground captured. We are not leaving the East Barrens until the orks are destroyed, one way or the other.'

'Understood, brother,' said Livenius. 'No retreat!'

The call was echoed by the others.

'Victory or death!' Validus added over the comm.

Belial laughed.

'Indeed, brothers,' he said. 'Today it truly is victory or death.'

The blast from the exploding ork missile carrier shook the ground. Mangled debris cascaded down onto the greenskins in a shower of metal and flame. With one target destroyed, the *Hammer of Judgement* plunged onwards to the ork landing site, lascannons cutting brilliant traces down the ridge. The *Caliban's Wrath* followed close behind, heavy bolters thundering, slashing a swathe through the enemy camp. To the left – the north – the two Razorbacks of the column laid down covering fire whilst the combat squads disembarked into a defile running down the ridgeline towards the geothermal station.

Belial monitored the destruction on the tactical screen, the interior of the Rhino bathed with soft yellow light. The data from the Ravenwing reconnaissance had been ideal, pinpointing the concentrations of the ork forces and confirming that the anti-aircraft rockets had not been moved. It was a tactical nuance – the redeployment of defensive elements after an enemy encounter – that had been lost on the greenskins, and the Dark Angels made them pay with blood.

'Master Belial to Brother Hephaestus. Elimination of air defences proceeding quickly. Take position to begin your attack run. Confirm.'

While the Techmarine's confirmation sounded from the comm, Belial adjusted the display settings and zoomed out for a wider view. Collating sensor sweeps from the Ravenwing to the north and south, the tactical metriculators presented the commander with a view of the battlefield only a few seconds old. If he was attacking over a narrower front, Belial would have witnessed the action by eye, and been able to respond even more quickly, but the undulating ground and mile-wide attack made that impossible. Instead he saw his forces from the signatures of their identity transponders and looked at enemies that were nothing more than augur returns and thermal responses.

The main comm feed was a chatter of information as vehicle commanders and

squad sergeants exchanged information and coordinated their attacks. The constant battle commentary was like a background hum, attracting his attention only when something out of the ordinary was reported. He would then spend a few seconds dealing with the issue before leaving his leaders at the front to carry out their orders as they saw fit.

It was not Belial's place to interfere with the close-range squad actions, but to provide an omniscient guiding hand: steering the entire assault in the desired direction, keeping an eye on the wide picture for emerging threats and opportunities.

One such threat was growing in the outbuildings between the power station and the left flank of the attack. A battery of ork howitzers and mortars were tossing their shells up the ridge. The bombs were not strong enough to pose any genuine threat to the armoured hulls of the Rhinos, but as the transport rocked from another close blast, Belial did not want to take any chances. A lucky hit on a hatch or the breaking of a tread link would be enough to remove a whole squad from the fight.

'Razorbacks, close and engage enemy artillery in grid omega-five. Keep them pinned down. Combat Squad Bellaphon, follow in and take up a position at grid omega-six. Confirm.'

Belial waited for the responses before turning his attention to the other flank, where the *Hammer of Judgement* was fast approaching the teleporter opening. Since the Space Marines had arrived, a steady stream of orks had continued to arrive through the portal and were massing in a copse of trees to the south.

The Predator's rune flashed red in warning a moment before the commander, Brother Meledon, cut through the other comm traffic.

'Engaged with anti-tank rockets from the south-east. Right sponson damaged, gunner unharmed. Request orders, brother-captain. Shall I push on to the last anti-air missile or pull back?'

Belial made the decision in a moment; the advantage of clearing the airspace over the plant for the Thunderhawk outweighed the possible loss of a Predator.

'Advance and engage your target, Meledon. *Caliban's Wrath*, divert to provide flank support.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. *Hammer of Judgement* moving in on last air-defence missiles.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. *Caliban's Wrath* engaging enemy in the woods with all weapons. *Hammer of Judgement* clear to advance.'

Panning the display back to the left, Belial saw that the Razorbacks and combat

squad he had sent forwards were doing a good job of suppressing the enemy artillery. It had been several seconds since the last shell had exploded around the Rhinos.

'Hephaestus to Master Belial. On-station for attack run. Weapons armed. Targeting systems linked to Ravenwing spotters. Awaiting attack order.'

'Confirm, Hephaestus. Validus, can you get a clear target signal on those transports to the north-east?'

While he waited for the reply, the commander touched the screen and focussed on the two Predators. The *Hammer of Judgement* was rounding a ruined building and would have a clear view of the last anti-aircraft missile in a few seconds. The other tank was engaged in a furious firefight with the orks hiding amongst the short trees; Belial could picture the screaming heavy bolter rounds shredding orks and foliage, lascannon blasts splitting twisted trunks while wild rockets flew out of the depths.

Belial reached a decision.

'Master Belial to Hephaestus. Begin attack run. Primary targets designated by Ravenwing squadrons. Validus, can you confirm you have the ork transports in view?'

'Apologies, brother-captain. There are two columns of ork vehicles to the north-east. Closest is less than one kilometre away, light vehicles only. Second is three kilometres away, two heavier transports and a battlewagon. Which do you wish to engage?'

'Send the bike squadron to target the heavier vehicles for the gunship. Engage lighter vehicles with your land speeders. Confirm.'

'Confirm, brother-captain. Bike squad despatched to target for gunship. Forming land speeder strike on approaching ork light vehicles.'

With a detonation that Belial could hear through the thick hull of the Rhino, the ork missile carrier was destroyed. The elimination of the orks' last air defence was confirmed over the comm channel by the Predator's commander.

'Withdrawing to primary fire position with *Caliban's Wrath* to provide long-range support. Confirm, brother-captain.'

Belial checked the display once more. The orks in the woods would have to wait to receive retribution until the Tactical squads could move in to clear them out: there was no point risking the Predators in the narrow confine of hills and buildings any longer.

'Confirm, *Caliban's Wrath* and *Hammer of Judgement*. Withdraw to provide fire support.'

The momentum of the attack was building as Belial had foreseen. With all of his force now capable of playing its part, the time was swiftly arriving to push home the attack. The commander gave the display one last scan to ensure there was nothing amiss, and signalled the Thunderhawk.

'Master Belial to Hephaestus. What is your time on target?'

'Hephaestus to Belial. One hundred and five seconds until optimal firing range. Still awaiting target confirmation.'

'Belial to Validus. Report status of bike squadron.'

There was a pause while the Ravenwing leader consulted with the squad sergeant.

'Validus to Brother Belial. Target acquisition in thirty seconds. Enemy vehicles now two-point-five kilometres away.'

'Confirm, Brother Validus.' As with the destruction of the air defences, it was time to pre-empt the probable result of the Thunderhawk attack. To delay further would risk losing the shock and impetus of the first assault. 'Master Belial to all units. Commence phase three, general assault. Proceed to your designated attack points with all speed.'

He stood up and slapped his driver on the shoulder.

'Let's get going, brother. It is time to push forwards.'

'Confirm, brother-captain.'

Belial pulled himself up to the cupola and threw open the hatch. His autosenses darkened as the commander emerged into the bright afternoon light from the artificial twilight of the Rhino's interior. Taking a hold of the storm bolter's grip, he checked the magazine and sighted on a cluster of rocks a few hundred metres away.

With a lurch, the Rhino set off, rumbling down the ridgeside, tracks grating through the thin soil, engine throbbing. The transport hurtled over a rise of rock and crashed down on the far side, but Belial's armour and innate balance allowed him to ride the violent movement without problem. Across narrow gorges and around boulders, the Rhino sped towards the orks, other transports flanking it two hundred metres away to the left and right.

Belial looked up as Hephaestus's Thunderhawk roared overhead, swooping onto the enemy reinforcements north-east of the attack. Fire rippled along the gunship's wings a moment before four missiles streaked away to the north, leaving dark contrails cutting across the sky. The distant crack of the detonations echoed along the ridge a few seconds later.

Fire from the right attracted Belial's attention. The outermost Rhino had run

into a mob of orks trying to sneak up a gulley to retake their earlier position. Storm bolter rounds split the air as the gunner unleashed a series of short salvoes. The Rhino slewed to a stop, access ramp slamming down even before it had finished moving. The squad within burst down the ramp, Brother Cademon at the front, flamer in hand. Fire licked through the scrub while the bark of bolters added to the crackle of flames and the pained bellows of the orks.

'Keep moving forwards,' Belial warned his warriors. 'I want every squad in position within two minutes.'

Just as the commander finished speaking he caught sight of a dark blur in the air. An instant later, something slammed into the front of the Rhino, showering Belial with paint and splinters of ceramite. The transport shuddered under the impact and bounced wildly over a rock as Brother Lephrael lost control for a moment. The vehicle skidded sideways down the slope, tracks churning up grass and mud.

Belial looked back along the estimated trajectory of the shell. He saw what at first might be mistaken for a rubbish heap: piles of rags, discarded metal, bones and broken bits of machinery. From under one pile protruded the long barrel of a gun, smoke drifting from the muzzle.

'Belial to company. Anti-tank weapon three hundred metres to the east. Suppressive fire.'

The commander opened fire with the mounted storm bolter, loosing off single rounds in the direction of the anti-tank gun. Other bolts whirred against the field piece from the left and right.

'Keep going,' Belial told Lephrael. 'Close the range.'

A puff of smoke, a sharp crack and the scream of the shell speeding overhead were the only results of the orks' next shot. Belial slapped his palm against the fire selector of the storm bolter, shifting the weapon into rapid-fire mode. In three-second bursts, he walked the salvo of bolts across the opening into the pit dug beneath the rubbish piles. He could see nothing of the results, save for the flashes of the bolt detonations.

A distinctive thud broke the air from above: the battle cannon of the Thunderhawk circling high above. Belial detected the screech of the descending round just before the whole rubbish tip disappeared in a flash of fire and smoke.

'Target destroyed,' Hephaestus announced over the comm. 'Hephaestus to company. Commencing first attack run on landing site. Do not proceed ahead of ascribed positions. Repeat, commencing aerial fire support on the landing site.'

The Rhino sped forwards again under Lephrael's guidance, cutting between two

massive boulders. The ground was rapidly levelling. The first buildings of the geothermal complex were only two hundred metres away.

The comm buzzed with squads reporting that they were in position. Firefights erupted to Belial's left amongst a row of empty fuel tanks. From even further north, the distinctive blaze of plasma and the white trails of missiles cut the air: the Devastators were in position overlooking the power plant itself and providing cover fire.

A hundred metres from his objective, Belial dropped back inside the Rhino. He glanced at the tac-display to confirm what he had seen from the cupola: phase three of the attack was well under way and progressing well. He turned to Charon and the other Space Marines in the main compartment.

'Disembarking in thirty seconds. Ready weapons.'

The Rhino rang with the sound of magazines being slapped into place and chainswords whirring as the bodyguard tested their weapons. Amongst the noises from within, Belial heard something rattling against the hull from without.

'Small-arms fire, brother-captain,' Lephrael assured him. 'Stupid orks don't know that bullets won't do a thing to us.'

'Where from?' asked Belial. In a crouch, he moved up beside the driver and peered through the vision slit.

'Two-storey building thirty degrees to the left, brother-captain.'

There were at least a dozen orks at the windows of the building, muzzle flares flashing from their long tusks and red eyes. Belial turned back to the others.

'Prepare for building breach. Ready grenades.'

The commander had taken a step back towards the main compartment when Lephrael gave a shout. A red light winked on the console in front of the driver.

'Projectile detected!'

Something heavy slammed into the right flank of the Rhino, the explosion tilting the transport off one track for a moment. Lephrael wrestled at the controls, hissing curses.

'By the Lion, what was that?' Belial demanded, hunching over the tactical display.

All he could see was a thermal register seventy metres away, between two low buildings. He hauled himself back up to the command cupola and looked for himself. In the shadow of the alleyway was an ork Dreadnought-class walker, a rack of missiles mounted on one shoulder, a power claw hanging from the other. It advanced into the light as another rocket slid down a feed rail into the

launcher.

Boots clanging loudly, Belial dropped into the Rhino. He punched the activation rune of the transport's hunter-killer missile system. Above him, next to the cupola, the firing case of the launcher extended itself from the hull. Belial flipped the switch that opened the launcher, while his other hand turned on the artificial eye mounted into the missile.

The feed fuzzed into life on a small screen above the controls just in time to show the smoke trail of another rocket passing a few metres in front of the Rhino, which was still speeding towards the ork-held building.

Belial swivelled the launcher until he caught a glimpse of the ork walker stomping forwards. He thumbed the fire switch and the Rhino rattled as the hunter-killer missile streaked away. With deft movements, Belial guided the hunter-killer towards the Dreadnought, eyes fixed to the small circle of the pict-feed. The missile curved around and straightened under Belial's command; with his final touch the view dipped towards the hip joint of the machine.

Pipes, cables and pistons came closer and closer on the screen, and then the display went dark. The detonation of the missile sounded through the open hatch above. Belial pulled himself up to check the results of the hit. Bullets from the orks in the building pattered around him as he watched the Dreadnought topple to one side, leaking thick smoke and oil, one leg sheared away, the rocket launcher driving point-first into the dirt.

Seizing hold of the storm bolter, Belial turned the weapon on the orks holding the upper storey of the building, sending steady bursts through the broken windows. The Rhino ground to a stop a few metres from the remnants of the main doors, one of the pair hanging haphazardly from a single hinge, the other nowhere to be seen, probably stolen.

Charon and the command squad needed no order from Belial to deploy. The rear hatch slammed down and the Rhino rocked from side to side as the six Space Marines charged out. Belial fired off another burst and then pulled himself fully out of the cupola. Unholstering his plasma pistol and drawing his sword, he ran to the side of the Rhino and jumped down, landing in a puff of dry dirt, feet sinking into the ground.

'Sons of Caliban, with me!' he called to the others, plunging into the shadowy interior of the building.

Tactical acumen swept aside by natural ferocity, the orks abandoned their superior position in the upper floor and raced down the stairs to confront the Space Marines. Belial fired a ball of plasma into the mass of green-skinned

beasts pouring down the steps, while the commander's honour guard fanned out around him, bolters and plasma gun thundering.

There were more foes than Belial had realised as the green mass continued to crash down on him: at least two dozen orks, three of them huge specimens that towered over the others.

Charon dashed past the Dark Angels master, force sword in both hands, his whole body swathed in a mist of blue and black. The orks' bullets melted into mist as they touched the Librarian, leaving a trailing glitter of metal particles in his wake. He swept his sword effortlessly through the first alien, parting it from waist to shoulder in one blow. Charon caught a jagged axe-head on the guard and twisted his wrists, sending the point of the gleaming blade through the ork's face.

Not to be outdone, Belial sprinted into the mass of greenskins, pistol spitting another blue blast. He opened the throat of an ork with a short cut, barged aside its falling body and rammed his sword through the chest of a second. He smashed the pommel into the face of a third, sending it reeling back into its companions.

One of the ork leaders shouldered its way through the throng, a bloodstained cleaver-like blade in both hands. As it swung the cumbersome weapon back, Belial pounced, slashing his power sword into the beast's ribs, the shining blade parting muscle and bone and internal organs in one cut. Though grievously wounded, the ork was not down. Its cleaver swung at Belial's head with deadly momentum.

An instant before the blow struck, the captain's displacer field activated. Belial's stomach lurched as he was shunted into warp space; for a fraction of a second he was surrounded by a cacophony of wailing, screaming and shouting while his limbs shuddered with unnatural energy and his eyes danced with swirling light of every colour.

Reality reasserted itself with a popping of air pressure. Belial found himself a few metres back towards the doors. His senses took half a second to adjust, by which time he was already pounding across the bare stone floor, sword raised for the next attack.

Charon was surrounded by a pile of gently smoking body parts. An ork ducked beneath the Librarian's sword and lunged at his groin with a serrated dagger. The blade scraped harmlessly from Charon's armour. He let go of his sword with one hand and grabbed the ork's outstretched wrist in his fist. Psychic energy snarled across the ork, skin charring, fat bubbling as the psychic power fizzed along

tendons and blood vessels. The greenskin collapsed, convulsing wildly, steam rising from melted eyes, frothing blood pouring from its nose and ears.

Charon kicked the corpse aside and took up his sword in both hands, ready for the next foe.

The fighting was brutal and swift, but not entirely to the favour of the Space Marines. By the time the last ork was dead, Apothecary Nestor was already tending to Brother Mandiel, whose right hand had been sheared off by an ork blade. The armour of the others showed numerous cracks, scarred paint and bullet holes as testament to the fury of their foes.

'Secure the rest of the building,' said Belial, leaping up the stairs.

There were bodies on the upper floor, and two orks wounded by Belial's storm bolter fire. They looked up at the Space Marine with beady red eyes, one clutching a ragged hole in its gut, the other trying to heave itself up on its remaining leg.

Belial's power sword made short work of the crippled greenskins.

Surrounded by calm for a moment, Belial linked in his autosenses to the tactical cogitator in the Rhino outside. The view through his right lens was replaced by a miniature version of the battle map. Minute eye movements scrolled the display, allowing Belial to see what had happened while he had been fighting. With his left eye, he looked through a cracked window pane, confirming what the map was showing.

The other squads were in position, forming a semicircle around the geothermal station and the portal. Battle-cannon craters broke the open ground around the teleporter site, while fires burned in several of the other buildings, smoke drifting lazily on the breeze. The portal was still active though; as Belial watched, it bloomed into life and disgorged a pair of trikes, their heavy weapons opening up on the Space Marines almost immediately. The Predators on the ridge overlooking the landing site returned fire, lascannon shots lancing down to blow up one of the trikes; the other swerved wildly and disappeared into the rocks and gulleys further south.

Belial could not see the whole of the power plant from where he was standing. He moved into the adjoining room. The roof was low and sloping, but a ragged hole gave him a better view. He could see orks moving around the transformer blocks, and on the maze of gantries and ladders above the station, now protected by crudely welded metal sheets and piles of rocks and junk: from his earlier foray when he had stolen the power relay, the orks had learnt the importance of keeping the Space Marines away from their precious energy transmitter.

Charon joined him, stooping beneath the rafters.

‘The battle goes well, brother,’ said the Librarian.

‘Well enough,’ said Belial.

He switched off the tac-display and hailed the other squads.

‘Belial to company. Tactical report by unit. Casualty and supply details.’

In turn, the sergeants reeled off the statistics. As he heard the reports, Belial realised that the swiftness of the assault had been a great success, but not without a price. There was not a squad that was at full strength, and two of the Tactical squads had lost half their number securing the buildings at the centre of the landing site.

He looked again at the power plant, trying to guess the number of orks within. Several hundred, he reckoned, and they seemed more than happy to keep themselves hidden away. The Techmarines’ analysis of whether a Thunderhawk attack was as risky to the geothermal network as orbital bombardment had been inconclusive. Without that support, taking the station would be bloody work indeed. If the Dark Angels tried and failed, they might lack the strength to contain the reinforcements still arriving.

Belial looked at Charon. The snap of bolter fire and crack of lascannons could be heard across the landing site, answered by the rattle of ork guns. The roar of Hephaestus’s Thunderhawk passed overhead accompanied by the sound of heavy bolters.

‘Would it be weakness to change the conditions by which we judge victory?’ the commander asked.

‘It is the nature of war that we must continually revise our expectations and objectives,’ said the Librarian. ‘It would be weakness to affirm victory simply for quiet contentment, but it would be folly to strive for the unachievable and risk what has been gained. What are you considering?’

‘I think that it is a greater duty to contain the orks until Grand Master Azrael arrives with the rest of the Chapter,’ said Belial. ‘It would be hubris to try to destroy them in a vain demonstration of commitment. While we must have the strength to fight alone, we must not forget that we are a brotherhood. We can be proud of what we achieve but cannot allow pride to master us and drive us to act for the sake of reputation alone.’

Belial took a deep breath, looked at the power plant again and opened up the command channel.

‘This is Belial to company. Mission accomplished. Abort phase four. We will not be assaulting the power plant. Maintain positions, fortify defences and

destroy any enemy that opportunity presents.’

The landing site belonged to Belial. That was victory enough. All that remained was to keep the orks occupied until the Chapter arrived to sweep them away. If the orks wanted Kadillus, they would have to come and take the landing site back.

The Dark Angels would be waiting.

# THE TALE OF TAUNO

## DEATH BY MOONLIGHT

The crackle of campfires and the aroma of rehydrated protein stew wafted along the defensive line on Koth Ridge. The grass and dirt had been trampled into a hard mat by hundreds of feet, here and there scarred by the tracks of vehicles. The barricades had been rebuilt following the last ork attack, several of them strengthened by plascrete blocks hauled up from ruined buildings in Kadillus Harbour. Nightfowl screeched and squawked to each other beyond the glow of the fires.

Dumping his pack behind the ration-box barricade, Tauno slumped down beside the fire with a yawn.

'Don't get comfy, trooper,' said Sergeant Kaize. He scribbled something on a scrap of paper and passed it to Tauno as he clambered to his feet. 'Take this to Lieutenant Laursor.'

'Yes, sergeant,' said Tauno before setting off.

'You'll need this, moron,' said Kaize, picking up Tauno's lasgun and tossing it to him.

He ambled off into the darkness, heading for the tent housing the command squad. The wind was picking up, bringing a chill with it from further up Kadillus Island. Tauno squinted at the notes on the paper, but could make little sense of them. There were some letters and numbers he recognised, and the odd word, but most of it was a meaningless jumble of symbols. It was probably nothing important, he thought, as he crumpled the paper into the pocket of his jacket.

Turning up his collars against the cold, he slung his lasgun over his shoulder by its strap and thrust his hands into his trouser pockets to keep them warm. He heard laughter and chatter from the other squads, arguing over bets, complaining about the poor food or swapping friendly insults. One sergeant with drooping

moustaches berated his men for sloppy dress and other acts of slovenliness. Behind the front line, heavy weapon crews dozed next to their guns.

Blinking in the bright light, Tauno ducked under the awning covering the comms equipment given to the company by the Dark Angels. Behind the trestle tables laden with consoles and dials, cables snaked into the darkness to the dish array that the Techmarines had set up for the company commander. The officer, Lieutenant Laursor, sat on a small canvas-seated stool with a comm pick-up in hand. His staff milled around him, as bored as Tauno.

'…pecting the orks to launch an attack to retake the landing site.' Tauno recognised Colonel Grautz's voice coming through the comm speaker. 'That said, it is possible that the orks will make a last, desperate bid for Kadillus Harbour in an attempt to link up with their forces in the city. If they do, it's unlikely that they will assault your part of the line, lieutenant, but your company must be ready to provide reinforcements to the officers further to the north.'

'I understand, colonel,' said Laursor.

'Make sure that you do, lieutenant,' said Grautz. 'Also be aware that the Astartes can cope with the level of ork reinforcements at their current level, but the enemy cannot be allowed to increase the power to their teleporter. That means ensuring the relay station between Kadillus Harbour and the East Barrens remains out of their hands. That relay station is your responsibility, Laursor.'

'Yes, colonel,' replied the lieutenant, his voice mustering more enthusiasm than his expression.

'Let me spell it out for you, lieutenant, in case I have not made my point.' Laursor rolled his eyes at his command squad, but his expression grew serious at the colonel's next words. 'If the orks can establish a power link between three geothermal stations, the Astartes commander has told me that there will be an orbital bombardment of those stations. Even if that does not cause a catastrophic eruption to destroy the island, damage will be extreme.'

Hesitating just underneath the awning, Tauno caught the eye of the staff sergeant and pulled the paper from his pocket. The stocky Piscinan nodded and beckoned Tauno further inside.

'Patrol report, Sergeant Maikon,' said Tauno, keeping his voice quiet while Grautz continued to labour his point over the comm. He dropped the scrap of paper into the staff sergeant's proffered hand. 'Short version is that we didn't see nothing, sergeant.'

Tauno rubbed his hands together and blew on his fingertips, darting a glance at a pile of gently steaming meat steaks left on a plate.

‘Sit yourself down for a moment, lad, and grab yourself a bite to eat,’ the sergeant said with a sympathetic smile.

‘Thanks, sergeant,’ said Tauno. He pulled his bayonet from his belt and skewered a lump of half-charred meat and sat down on an empty stool next to the staff sergeant. ‘What is it?’

‘Whitehoof, son,’ said Maikon. ‘The lieutenant shot it himself earlier today. Found a herd of them by the stream just south of here, having a drink just before dusk.’

‘Sergeant Kaize wouldn’t let us shoot nothing on patrol,’ huffed Tauno. He sank his teeth into the steak, juices dribbling down his chin and onto the front of his jerkin.

‘That’s ’cause officers make the rules, son, and last I checked you ain’t an officer,’ said Maikon. His lip curled in distaste. ‘You best clean that off your jacket before you get back, or Sergeant Kaize will have you up on watch duty all night too.’

Tauno looked down at the greasy stain and grimaced.

‘You got a cloth or something, sergeant?’

Maikon puffed out his cheeks and sighed.

‘What’s a useless soldier like you doing in the defence force, son?’

‘Better’n working the omnitrawlers like me pa and grandpa,’ Tauno replied between chews. ‘The recruiting sergeant told me I might even get off-world, see other planets, if the Munitterum come for a tithe.’

‘Mew-nee-tor-umm, son. Departmento Munitorum. They’d take one look at you and ship you off to the Mechanicus to be made into a servitor. That recruiting sergeant must have known you was hauled in on the last net…’

‘It was you, sergeant,’ Tauno said. He gulped down the last of the venison and licked his fingers clean. ‘You were the one that recruited me.’

Maikon laughed and slapped Tauno on the knee.

‘Well, I’m sure I must have seen something in you.’ The staff sergeant glanced across the tent as Lieutenant Laursor ended his conversation with Grautz and tossed the pick-up onto the table. ‘Best get back to your squad, son.’

‘Appreciate it, sergeant,’ Tauno said with a wink.

He slipped out from under the canvas roof and sidled back to his squad’s rough billet. A few of them were already sound asleep, their deep breaths and gentle snores another part of the background noise. Remembering Maikon’s warning, Tauno kept to the shadows until he could pull his guncloth from his pack and wipe away most of the mess on the front of his grey tunic. Approximating

something like the appearance of a proper defence trooper, he joined the others, tin mug in hand. He poured himself some nu-char from the pot boiling over the fire and settled down, propping himself up on his pack.

'So, the Space Marines want to blow up Kadillus if the orks break through,' he said.

There was a chorus of surprise and dissent from the others.

'True enough; heard the colonel himself say as much,' Tauno continued.

'They would never do it,' said Lundvir.

'Sure they would,' said Sergeant Kaize. 'What do they really care about us, eh? Letting the orks run wild would be a bad mark against them, don't matter if a few ordinary folks get killed along the way.'

'I think I'd rather get blowed up by the Astartes than taken by the orks,' said Tauno. 'Least if the island goes, it'll be quick.'

'I don't want to be stuck out here if that's going to happen,' said Jurlberg, standing up. 'I've got family in Kadillus Harbour. If this is the end, I'm going back to the city to be with them I love.'

'You are not going anywhere, trooper,' said Kaize. 'You'll bloody well stay here and guard this bloody ridge. Those are our orders.'

Kauninnen stood up next to Lundvir.

'Karl's right, we should be protecting our homes, not stuck out here where nothing's going to happen.'

'Sit down, the pair of you,' growled Kaize. 'If the lieutenant spots you, it'll go badly for you.'

'I'm sure there's others would come with us,' said Lundvir. 'If we get enough of us together, nobody's going to stop us. We got to warn our families, get them off Kadillus!'

Tauno's gaze moved back and forth between the two men and the sergeant. Looking past Kaize, he saw pinpricks of red and yellow in the darkness, about a hundred metres away: the glowing eyes of the Space Marines.

'I think the lieutenant would be the least of your problems if you tries to get away,' said Tauno, sipping his nu-char. He nodded at the Astartes.

'It went all right last time,' said Lundvir. 'We got away from Barrak Gorge, didn't we? We told them we managed to retreat at the last moment and nothing was said.'

'Only because they need us here. And I shouldn't have listened to you then,' said Kaize. 'We're staying put this time.'

Tauno shared his sergeant's feelings; abandoning the power plant had probably

been a bad idea. It hadn't seemed such a big deal at the time – there had been plenty of Space Marines to protect the station – but on reflection it left a bitter taste in Tauno's mouth and an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. This time he was determined that if the orks did come he would stay and fight.

Regardless, they had all agreed not to mention it again.

'Keep your voice down,' said Tauno, looking at the Dark Angels. If they discovered the truth of what had happened at Barrak Gorge, there was no telling what they might do. 'You never know who's listening.'

Kauninnen followed Tauno's gaze and laughed harshly.

'Them? Nah, they can't hear us.' With a wordless growl, Kauninnen sat down again. 'You're probably right we'll never get away with it twice.'

'Just shut up about it,' said Kaize. 'There's nothing to worry about. There's been patrols all day and night and not an ork's been seen within ten kilometres. We sit tight here for a couple of days, the rest of the Dark Angels turn up and we can all go home.'

'It's all right for them,' said Kauninnen, voice growing louder with annoyance, still looking at the distant silhouettes of the giant Astartes. 'Tell you what: give me armour like that and I'd be just as brave.'

'I know what you mean,' added Daurin, rolling over on his blanket to look at the men gathered around the fire. He plucked disparagingly at the padded tunic covering his torso. 'They call this armour? My brothers have hauled in raspwhales with thicker skins than this.'

'And what about those bolters, eh?' said Kauninnen. 'Put a hole the size of your gob in an ork.' He stabbed a finger at his lasgun leaning against the wall of boxes. 'These things are junk. Never mind shooting orks, I wouldn't use one of these to find something in a dark room.'

Tauno laughed, but didn't really agree with the others. He'd lingered behind for a few minutes at Barrak Gorge and had seen the Space Marines fighting the greenskins. It had been terrifying, even just watching from a distance; the way they got stuck into those monsters without a moment's hesitation. Even with armour and a bolter, Tauno was pretty sure he wouldn't want to go head-to-head with an ork unless he had a two-hundred-metre head start.

'Yeah, yeah,' Daurin was saying. 'I blame the Imperial Commander. If she wants a defence force that can fight orks, we have to have the proper equipment.'

Tauno could see a large figure approaching through the darkness.

'Shut up,' Tauno hissed.

‘I mean, it’s all well and good being brave when the enemy can’t hurt you, isn’t it? I bet them Astartes wouldn’t be half as eager to get stuck in if they had this garbage to fight with. What do they care, anyway? They can just leave if they wanted to, while we ain’t got no choice. I mean, if things were starting to get really dangerous, they could just up and go, and leave us to do the dying.’

‘*Shut up*, Daurin,’ Tauno said between gritted teeth.

‘What’s your problem?’ Daurin asked. ‘They might have magic eyes and ears, and all them sensors and whatnot, but they can’t really hear us all the way over th…’

Daurin trailed off and his eyes widened as he saw the gigantic figure looming through the firelight. Tauno didn’t know much about Space Marines, but he had been around them long enough these last few days to recognise the markings of a sergeant.

The Space Marine’s dark green armour was polished, edged with reflection from the fire. Yellow eye lenses swept over the squad as Sergeant Kaize scrambled to his feet.

‘Can we help you, sir?’ said Kaize.

The Astartes stepped into the emplacement and sat back against the wall, boxes crumpling and settling under his weight.

‘Constant vigilance is the price of survival,’ said the Space Marine. His voice was quiet, edged with the buzz of his helm’s vox system. ‘In thousands of years, an ork had never set foot upon Piscina before ten days ago. Though you cannot see the enemy at this moment, it does not mean they have gone. My commander has reported no significant counter-attack against his forces holding the landing site; that means that the orks are somewhere else.’

The sergeant’s helm hid all expression, but the way his eye lenses lingered on the squad made Tauno uneasy.

‘The orks that were allowed to capture Barrak Gorge are unaccounted for,’ said the Space Marine. Though he detected no accusation in the statement, Tauno cringed with guilt. ‘Our patrols sweep the wilderness for them, but they have not been found. Do not think that you are safe from attack.’

‘So you think that orks will attack here?’ said Daurin, sitting up. His rebelliousness seemed to have evaporated as he flicked a nervous glance towards his squad-mates.

‘It is a possibility,’ said the sergeant. ‘It is your duty to stand ready in case they do.’

Kauninnen crossed his arms defiantly, though there was a quiver in his voice

when he spoke.

'Why are the Dark Angels waiting here with us? Why don't you hunt down the rest of the orks?'

The sergeant slowly turned his head to stare at Kauninnen.

'We all have our orders, trooper,' said the Space Marine. 'A better question would be to ask why you are not hunting the orks. As you have agreed, it is your homes that need defending. Perhaps the Piscinans would prefer that my brothers and I left them to fight this war by themselves?'

'I wasn't being ungrateful,' stammered Kauninnen. 'I mean…'

The Space Marine's gaze did not move as the soldier trailed into quiet.

'You said, "They can just leave if they wanted to, while we ain't got no choice. I mean, if things were starting to get really dangerous, they could just up and go, and leave us to do the dying," just a minute ago.' Kauninnen gulped as the Space Marine threw his words back at him. 'That you would make such an accusation betrays your lack of understanding of what it is to be an Astartes.'

The sergeant stood. Tauno craned his neck to follow the Space Marine as he leaned forwards and plucked Kauninnen's lasgun from his weak grip. The Space Marine looked at it and handed it back a moment later.

'Your weapons are inferior because better would be wasted on you,' said the sergeant. 'It takes as much effort to create one round for my bolt pistol as it does a whole lasgun. Would you entrust that one shot to such a poor marksman?'

He bent forwards, armour creaking, mouth-grille a short distance from Kauninnen's face.

'My armour is many thousands of years old, from before the Dark Angels came to Piscina.' The Space Marine's voice was harsher, a tone of anger in his words. 'Would you have it dishonoured by a wearer that flees from battle? Would you entrust the days of labour that go into its maintenance to a warrior that thinks only of protecting himself?'

Straightening, the sergeant looked at the others, who flinched as his gaze passed over them. Only Tauno managed to meet that glowing stare, and with much effort.

'There is a selfishness in men to protect what is theirs alone,' the sergeant continued. 'It is a short-sighted belief; for all a man is, he owes to the Emperor. The Astartes swear oaths to be the protectors of the Emperor's realm and His servants, beyond any personal desire or ambition. We have the armour and the weapons you desire because we are the few who are worthy of them. Such riches would be squandered on lesser men; frail, frightened men like you.'

‘That’s a bit harsh,’ mumbled Kaize. ‘We’re doing the best we can.’

‘Are you?’ the Space Marine snarled, his words cutting into Tauno’s conscience. ‘Which of you would leave this world, travel across the galaxy and lay down his life for the home of a family he had never met?’

The squad exchanged glances; nobody said a word.

‘Which of you would place yourself directly in danger, to save the lives of others? And do this not just once, on a spur of heroism, unthinking, but for a whole life, time after time, in full knowledge that one day you *will* die, and it will be a painful, bloody death. Which of you would not only do this thing, but embrace the sacrifice of the self it entails, not just dedicating one’s death to the Emperor, but one’s whole existence?’ The Space Marine’s voice softened. ‘You cannot answer these questions, and thus you cannot know what it is to be Astartes.’

The troopers were speechless: Kaize hung his head in shame while Daurin stared out into the darkness, eyes glistening. The Space Marine turned away. Tauno jumped up and called after him as he left the emplacement.

‘Excuse me, sir? There was a Scout-sergeant. He spoke to me a few days ago, asked my name. I haven’t seen him since, and I never learnt his name. Come to that, what are you called?’

The Astartes sergeant swung back to the squad.

‘I am Sergeant Ophrael of the Third Company. The sergeant you speak of was called Naaman; he proved many of us wrong and you owe your continued survival to his bravery and dedication.’

‘Was called? So, he’s dead?’

Ophrael nodded slowly.

‘Like many of my battle-brothers, he gave his life for the protection of your world. He will be remembered and honoured. He died alone, amidst a sea of enemies. Master Belial recovered his body a few hours ago. What did he say to you?’

‘He told me to do my duty, and to remember that the Emperor watches us.’

The sergeant stepped up, towering over Tauno, but his voice was gentle – as gentle as it could be with its metallic, clipped tone.

‘Wise words. Do not forget them again, nor the warrior that spoke them to you.’

‘I won’t, sergeant.’

‘You can never be Astartes, but you can still be a good soldier. Remember what you…’

Ophrael stopped and straightened, head cocked to one side. Tauno felt a

buzzing across his skin: the Space Marine's comm activating. The sergeant turned towards the east, his pale yellow eyes shifting to a bright red. Tauno felt nervous at the sudden change. The Space Marine's size had been intimidating from the moment he had walked over, but now there was something else about his demeanour that caused Tauno to shrink away; Ophrael's posture, the tilt of his head, the balling of his fists, all pointed towards a sudden unleashing of energy, like the rev of an engine or the whine of a power cell being slipped into a lasgun.

'Return to your squad, trooper,' said Ophrael. His tone was businesslike, abrupt. '*Bellum instantium.* Ready your weapons. The orks are coming.'

The defence line was in tumult; sergeants shouted, troopers ran back and forth, ammunition boxes were broken open and weapons given final checks. All through the Free Militia one question was being asked: where were the orks?

The Dark Angels had seen something with their infra-sight and were convinced an ork force was moving up the ridge. Tauno and the others peered into the dark but could see nothing.

'Hush up!' Kaize told them. 'Perhaps we can hear something. Orks aren't the quietest, are they?'

The squad fell into silence and Tauno strained to hear anything; the only sound was the wind across the rocks.

A rocket screamed out from the Devastators to the left. It exploded about four hundred metres down the ridge. In the flash of light, Tauno saw bodies being flung into the air and a mob of bestial faces.

'There!' he shouted. He levelled his lasgun in the direction of the blast and opened fire, sending a hail of blue las-bolts into the night.

The others joined him, shooting at shadows, until Kaize bellowed at them to cease fire.

'Save your power packs,' said the sergeant. 'Wait until you see something before you shoot.'

The Devastators were unleashing the full fury of their weapons: missiles streaked into the gloom while the squad's two heavy bolters split the air with thudding bursts, rounds cutting the night with flickering propellant trails.

'To the right!' said Hanaumman.

Tauno switched his view and laid his lasgun on the top of the barricade. The light of two moons broke through open patches in the cloud and a little way down the ridge he saw hunched bodies picking their way through the rocks. He

sighted on one of the dark shapes and pulled the trigger. He saw the bolt of laser energy flash down the slope and hit, but the ork did not fall.

The sparkle of muzzle flare split the night. An instant later, bullets were rattling against the crate wall. Tauno flinched, ducking back into cover. He felt a hand grab the scruff of his jerkin. Sergeant Kaize hauled him back to the firing position.

'Hiding ain't going to make them go away, is it?' said the sergeant. 'You want to stay safe? Shoot the bastards!'

All along the line squads were firing. A couple of brave souls ventured down the ridge line and hurled illumination flares. The patches of guttering red light revealed even more orks; the two troopers who had made the foray were cut down in a hail of fire as they sprinted back towards the defences.

'Come on, come on,' Tauno whispered to himself. The orks were using the undulating ground to work around to the squad's right.

'Sergeant, they're getting too close,' said Kauninnen. 'We should pull back.'

'No chance, trooper,' replied Kaize. 'Vinnaman! Get that flamer over to the right. Torch that stand of bushes. Give covering fire!'

Trooper Vinnaman was propelled out of the emplacement by Kaize's shove. Tauno added his las-fire to the rest of the squad's, firing past the slowly advancing flamer-man. When he was just about in range, Vinnaman opened fire, emptying the tank of his weapon. The dried branches of the bushes erupted as yellow fire bathed the slope. Orks thrashed in the inferno; some fell, many retreated, patting frantically at burning clothes and patches of lighted fuel sticking to their bodies.

The burning bushes gave the squad more light to see by and Tauno was able to pick his targets more clearly. He shot an ork in the arm as it lumbered from behind one boulder to the next. The hit caused it to drop its pistol. Stumbling back into the open to retrieve the weapon, the alien was met by another blast from Tauno's lasgun. The shot hit the ork square in the chest. Glaring back at the troopers, the ork snatched up its pistol and fired back, oblivious to the smoking hole in its padded armour.

Tauno gritted his teeth as more bullets whirred past, missed his next shot, but scored another hit with the following one. Finally the ork went down, its leg wounded. Tauno shook his head in disbelief as he saw the ork dragging itself away through the long grass. He fired twice more, a growl in his throat, until the ork stopped moving.

Lausso shouted in pain and stumbled back from the barricade, blood streaming

from his left shoulder. Tauno turned to help him but was pushed back to the wall by Kaize.

'Keep shooting, I'll sort him out,' said the sergeant.

The next few minutes blurred into a harrowing experience of feral faces lit by las-bolts and dancing flames, the crack and whistle of bullets flying around answered by the zip of the lasguns. At one point the orks came close enough to throw stick grenades into the emplacement to the squad's right. Tauno watched in horror as troopers were flung across the barricade by the detonations.

'Direct your fire to the south!'

Lieutenant Laursor strode along behind the defence line, waving his chainsword at the orks, his command squad tailing him. The bark of autocannons added to the cacophony and tracer shells tore through the blackness from higher up the slope.

'Look at that!' said Kauninnen.

The trooper pointed north. The Dark Angels Assault squad that had been left to guard the ridge leapt forwards, jump pack jets burning with bright blue flame. Plasma flickered from a couple of pistols as they descended on a group of orks a few dozen metres from the line. Tauno watched the ensuing fight as he ejected the spent power pack from his lasgun and fumbled home a fresh charge.

The trooper winced as he saw pistols blazing, blades and chainblades swinging. It looked a complete mess, but the Assault Marines carved into the larger body of orks with purpose, seeking out their towering leader. The mob of greenskins swirled around them, hacking and firing.

'Don't worry about them, lad.' Tauno looked over his shoulder and found Staff Sergeant Maikon crouched in the emplacement. The command squad veteran pointed south. 'Worry about them.'

Following up their grenade attack, the orks had swarmed from cover and were trying to get into the emplacement. The few survivors of the squad within desperately swung their lasguns like clubs, battering at the orks as they clambered over the barricade. Two of them fell to the surging greenskins; the other two turned and ran, dropping their lasguns in their haste to get away.

No sooner had the orks poured over the wall of boxes and dirt-filled sacks, then they were engulfed in a wall of fire from both sides. Tauno added his own shots to the volleys; cramped by the emplacement's walls, the orks were a hard target to miss, even if only a few of Tauno's shots did any serious damage.

Tauno ducked involuntarily as a missile streaked over his head. It exploded in the heart of the onrushing orks, scything down half a dozen with shrapnel.

Heavy bolt-rounds whickered through the air a few metres from the Piscinans, cutting down the surviving greenskins. Another missile streaked along the ridge from the Space Marine Devastators, passing almost within reach of Tauno before it detonated twenty metres further on, blowing apart even more orks.

'Emperor's fury, I thought they were going to hit us,' gasped Kaize, slumping back against the barricade, eyes fearful.

'Show a little faith, sergeant,' said Maikon. The staff sergeant stood up and looked south. 'Looks like that attack has been dealt with.'

Tauno scanned the ridgeside to the right. There were a few orks still alive, skulking back down the slope, some limping along. He fired a few more shots at them to hurry the orks on their way.

'And don't come back!' Lisskarin shouted after the retreating greenskins. 'We got more where that came from!'

Tauno laughed with relief. His first proper battle with orks, and he had survived. His mood swiftly changed, though.

'Sergeant Maikon, redress the squads,' said Lieutenant Laursor. 'Astartes report more infantry coming, this time with vehicle support. Rasmussen! Run with these coordinates to the mortar crews and tell them to lay on a heavy bomb.'

The lieutenant showed none of his earlier indifference. His eyes gleamed in the glow of the fires. Tauno thought Laursor looked like he was enjoying himself; truly officers were a different species.

It wasn't long before the troopers could hear the deep growl of ork engines. The smoke from the guttering fires was tainted with the oily stench of exhaust fumes. Motors revved in the darkness, a mechanical war-cry every bit as unnerving as the howls of the orks that had come before.

Tauno looked at his lasgun and pictured the little damage it had done to the orks. Against anything tougher, it was useless.

'Sergeant, should we move a bit closer to the heavy weapons squads?' he suggested. 'You know, to give them some protection.'

'Nice try, Tavallinen,' laughed Kaize. 'We're staying right here. My advice is to shoot at the green bits.'

There was a ripple of flashes several hundred metres down the ridge. Half a second later, Tauno heard the deep retorts of big guns. Above, shells whined as they plunged downwards.

'Incoming!' Tauno bellowed, hurling himself to the base of the barricade.

The troopers hit the ground a moment after, as the two shells exploded some way behind the defensive line. From his prone position, Tauno found himself

looking into the dead eyes of Lausso. The shadows from the dying light of the fire made the trooper's face appear to move, grimacing at his fate. Tauno shuddered and looked away.

'Get up,' said Sergeant Kaize, kicking the men back to their feet.

As he set his lasgun back on the barricade, Tauno saw more flashes of field guns in the distance, perhaps a kilometre northwards up the line. The orks weren't holding back, that was for sure.

This time the shells fell around the Devastators. The Space Marines ignored the dirt and flame exploding around them and continued to fire, picking out targets only they could see.

'Look lively!' The call came from Staff Sergeant Maikon. 'Maintain fire discipline. Hold the line.'

Maikon gestured for Kaize to join him. Tauno kept one eye down the ridge as he listened in on what was said.

'The lieutenant's just received word from Colonel Grautz,' Maikon said. 'The orks are trying to push out of Kadillus Harbour to link up. Although the whole line has been attacked, it looks like the greatest numbers are here. The colonel thinks the orks are making a bid for the relay station. Grautz is sending an armoured column, it'll be here just after dawn. We have to hold, no matter the cost.'

'Why don't we fall back and protect the relay station?' asked Kaize.

'Better defensive position here, Saul,' said Maikon. 'We fight and die on Koth Ridge.'

Kaize nodded and rejoined the squad as Maikon walked on to talk to the other sergeants.

'Looks like the worst of it will be coming our way,' he told them. 'This is it, boys. This is where you get to defend your homes.'

Tauno remembered what the colonel had told Laursor: if the orks linked up, the Space Marines would bombard Kadillus rather than let it fall into enemy hands. He looked at the Space Marines along the ridge – now firing their bolters as well as their heavy weapons – and wondered if they would be withdrawn before that happened.

He dismissed the question. If what Sergeant Ophrael had said was true, the orks would only break through when the last Space Marine on the ridge was dead. It gave cold comfort to Tauno; he realised that he was far more likely to die before the last of the Astartes.

'Pay attention,' snarled Kaize, cuffing Tauno round the back of his head.

‘Targets to the front!’

Snapping back to the immediate threat to his continued survival, Tauno sighted down his lasgun. The roar of engines was everywhere, to the left and right. He saw orks on massive bikes hurtling up the ridge straight at him. He fired vainly along with the others, most of their las-bolts missing the fast-moving bikers or harmlessly striking the heavy machines. A few lucky shots hit one rider, sending him crashing from his ride, the half-tracked bike careening on for a few metres before toppling into a crack in the volcanic rock.

Slightly ahead of them, the Assault Marines were bounding back up the ridge. The bikers opened fire, unleashing a storm of bullets, tracer rounds and shells from their mishmash of cannons and guns. Tauno had difficulty seeing what happened; he saw one of the Space Marines land badly, his leg wounded mid-jump. The Astartes toppled to one side, overbalanced by his jump pack. More rounds crashed into the squad as the Space Marines formed up around their fallen battle-brother.

Tauno opened fire at the bikes closing in on the Assault Marines, his finger tapping the trigger over and over, sending a hail of las-bolts into the orks. The flashes of energy zipping down the hillside lit the entire ridge, searing blurred lines across Tauno’s vision.

Mortar bombs erupted, lascannon blasts burned through the dark to ignite fuel tanks, autocannon shells screamed and heavy bolters thundered. Tauno could barely hear the words of those around him as they shouted in fright or hurled abuse at the onrushing greenskins. He realised he was shouting too, a meaningless torrent of insults and curses.

Two remaining bikers slammed their machines directly into the Assault Marines; the orks’ guns were still blazing as they hacked wildly with fearsome blades. One Space Marine was hurled from his feet by the impact, but the bike fared little better, flipping and tumbling across the rock from the crash. The Space Marine slowly rose to his feet; the ork biker did not.

For all the fury of the troopers’ fire, the orks were still advancing, no more than a hundred metres away. More shells exploded around the Piscinans and bullets thudded into the barricades. Ork walkers – four-armed Dreadnoughts that made even the largest greenskins look small – stomped alongside the infantry, hurling rockets and flares of explosive energy.

A Space Marine land speeder darted out of the night, skimming just above the ground. The rip of its assault cannon cut through the other noises of war, the speeder illuminated by several seconds of fire. A swathe of orks fell to the attack

run, gunned down by hundreds of rounds. The gunner strafed left and right with his heavy bolter, firing short bursts, every salvo ripping apart an ork warrior.

It was a chaos of flashing light and deafening sound. Tauno tried to block it all out. He exchanged his charge pack again and kept firing, pouring shot after shot into the greenskins. Maybe one in three found his intended target; of those, few stopped the ork they hit.

Slowed by the biker attack, the Assault Marines were in danger of being swamped by the tide of green aliens pouring up the ridge. Tauno did what little he could: firing endlessly into the mass of orks closing with the Space Marines.

'By the Holy Throne!' Kauninnen gasped next to Tauno.

The other trooper was looking further north. Tauno dragged his eyes away from the enemy to see what had prompted such a reaction.

A lone figure clad in power armour and blue robes strode purposefully towards the orks. In one hand he fired a bolt pistol with metronomic repetition; in the other he carried an ornately carved staff tipped with a winged skull decoration. A nimbus of power surrounded the Space Marine, a swirling aura of black and red.

White spears of energy danced from the staff as the Librarian pointed it at an ork buggy racing in his direction. Lightning leapt, arcing across the gap to engulf the vehicle, crawling over the machine and its crew. Something caught fire and a moment later the buggy was a ball of flame rolling back down the ridge. The Librarian advanced further, bolts of energy shrieking from his staff, scouring the orks from moss-covered ruins.

Tauno had little time to wonder at the terrifying powers he was witnessing. The orks had reached the Devastators and a vicious melee was unfolding. With his power fist glowing, Sergeant Ophrael was leading the defence, smashing down any greenskin that tried to clamber over the barricade; others in the squad gunned down the orks with their bolters and slashed at them with combat knives.

For all that the ork dead were piling up by the Dark Angels' barricade, there were too many to be held back. One or two greenskins managed to get inside the emplacement while others were swamping the Space Marines to either side.

The sight of the beset Space Marines filled Tauno with panic. If the Astartes fell, what chance did the rest of them have? He glanced around. There was a lull in the fighting close at hand – the heavy weapons not far behind him had taken a heavy toll and the orks were funnelling northwards, away from their deadly fire.

If ever there was a time to get out alive, this was it.

A tap on Tauno's shoulder attracted his attention: it was Daurin. He flicked a glance behind Tauno. The trooper turned and saw Sergeant Kaize face-down

sprawled in the dirt, half his head missing.

'Come on, we've done the best we can,' said Daurin.

Tauno quickly looked around: Lieutenant Laursor was back in his command tent, talking on the vox-caster. There was no sign of Maikon. The defence trooper took in the other squads around him, many of them numbering only a handful of survivors. He looked back at the Devastators, punching and hacking at the middle of a growing number of orks. When they fell, the greenskins would be able to sweep along the line and break out westwards; any line of retreat would be cut off.

He saw Sergeant Ophrael punching his power fist through the skull of an ork. Desperation filled Tauno. He wanted to run so badly, to get back to Kadillus Harbour and see his father again. He had been an idiot to join up.

But he had joined up. He had sworn oaths on big books full of words he did not understand, but that promise he understood well enough. It was a promise to keep his father and grandfather safe. A promise just the same as the Space Marines had made: to lay down his life in defence of the Imperium.

'We have to do our duty,' he said, his voice flat, as if spoken by someone else.

'What?' said Daurin. 'Are you touched?'

Something inside Tauno snapped.

'The Emperor is watching us!' he screamed. 'He is judging us right now!'

Tauno snatched the bayonet from his belt and broke into a run, vaulting over the barricade. His fingers fumbled with the blade as he sprinted, but he slotted the bayonet onto its lug at the fourth attempt.

He heard panting and realised it was him. But there was someone else with him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Laisko and Kauninnen. A few metres behind them, the others followed, Daurin included.

'No running away this time, eh?' gasped Laisko.

Tauno gritted his teeth and pumped his arms and legs, charging headlong at the orks fighting the Space Marines. He focussed his attention on the aliens, picturing what would happen to his family in Kadillus Harbour if the orks won this battle.

'For Kadillus! For Piscina!' The words bellowed from his mouth unbidden, but his next shout he knew was his, boiling up from the guilt and the horror and the fear that swirled in the pit of his stomach. It was the only thing he could say that made any sense of what he was doing. 'For the Emperor!'

Some of the orks turned to face the onrushing troopers, startled by the sudden attack. Terror gripped Tauno as he looked at their horrid fanged faces, corded

muscles and beady, fury-filled red eyes. Some of them looked like they were laughing. Tauno's dread fuelled his rage further and he sprinted harder, screeching a wordless cry.

He speared his bayonet into the chest of the closest ork, his momentum sending the creature crashing backwards. Ripping out the blade, he plunged it again, and again, and again, screaming all the while. Something smashed into the back of his head and he slashed out wildly, the tip of his bayonet cutting across an ork's face.

Dazed, Tauno staggered back a step and the others rushed past him, each crying out their own anger and fear. He felt blood trickling down the back of his neck, and wondered idly for a moment if he would be in trouble for getting another stain on his uniform. Shaking off his dizziness, he threw himself back into the melee, stabbing and lashing out at anything with green skin, not caring whether his blows landed or not.

Daurin collapsed in front of him, a cleaver wedged into his forehead. As the ork struggled to free its weapon from the skull of Tauno's friend, the trooper rammed his bayonet into its face, punching through its eye into its brain. He remembered his training and gave his lasgun a twist before wrenching the bayonet free.

'What am I doing?' he muttered to himself, the surge of energy that had propelled him to the fight evaporating as the ork's body fell onto Daurin. 'Emperor protect me!'

Lundvir fell next, his head blown apart by a pistol shot under his chin. Tauno acted on reflex, bringing up his rifle to stop a blade that would have lopped off his arm. The lasgun buckled under the force of the blow and almost fell from Tauno's hands. To his left, Kauninnen screamed in pain and slumped sideways, his leg flopping away with a life of its own. Tauno fended away another attack but in doing so tripped over Lundvir's corpse.

Winded by the fall, Tauno stared up numbly as a greenskin battered its way past Laurssen and loomed over him. He pointed his lasgun at the alien's leering face and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Grunting, the ork kicked away Tauno's weapon and pointed a pistol at the trooper's chest. In a moment, Tauno could see everything with startling clarity: the drool dripping from the ork's fangs, the strange glyph carved into the metal casing of the bulky pistol, the dirty claw of the finger tightening on the trigger.

Something towering and dark blocked Tauno's view. He saw a blaze of blue energy and heard crackling noises. Blood splashed onto his boots. The headless

body of an ork slumped into the dirt.

Sergeant Ophrael stepped away, tossing aside the remnants of the ork's head with his power fist. Tauno saw blood spitting and steaming from the energy-wreathed glove. The red eyes glowing in the faceless mask of the Space Marine sergeant's helmet were more frightening than anything Tauno had seen in the orks. He lay rigid with fear, paralysed by his close call with death.

'On your feet,' said the Space Marine.

Ophrael turned and caught a whirring chainblade on the side of his power fist. His bolt pistol barked once and the ork's chest disappeared in a bloody explosion.

'I have no weapon, sir,' Tauno said, his voice hoarse and weak.

Tauno winced as an ork blade crashed against Ophrael's shoulder pad. The Space Marine turned with the blow and smashed his helmet into the alien's face as it stumbled forwards. Fingers stretched, the sergeant plunged his power glove into the creature's gut. Fat and blood steamed as Ophrael ripped out the ork's innards.

'Take this,' said the sergeant, holding out his bolt pistol. 'Five rounds left. Make every bolt count.'

Tauno pushed himself to his feet and grabbed the weapon. He had to snatch it with both hands, the weight too much for one arm.

'Thank you, sir,' he said, but Ophrael had already turned to other matters and was wading into the orks outside the emplacement, his power fist crushing and smashing with relentless ferocity.

Tauno tentatively raised the bolt pistol, arms quivering. He saw an ork stepping in behind one of the Space Marines, a jagged blade ready to strike, and pulled the trigger with a wince. There was a kick from the weapon as the bolt's firing charge sent the projectile out of the barrel, but nothing more than the autoguns he had fired in training. A split-second later, the bolt no more than two or three metres away, the internal propellant kicked in with a crack that set Tauno's teeth on edge, its brief flare making him squint.

Straight and true, the accelerating bolt hit the ork just below the left shoulder blade. Skin and flesh buckled as the projectile punched in; a moment later the mass-reactive warhead detonated, ripping a hole the size of Tauno's head in the ork's back, splitting the shoulder blade from one end to the other.

The ork dropped sideways and smashed face-first into the dirt.

Tauno laughed.

'Take that, you green bastard!'

Four shots left, he reminded himself. Be an Astartes; make every shot count.

The brutal hack-and-slash moved a few metres further down the slope as the Space Marines countered the ork charge and pushed back. Still holding the pistol in both hands, he swung to his right, catching movement in the corner of his eye. A couple of orks had broken away from the press of fighting and were heading straight for him. Aim wobbling with fear and the weight of the bolt pistol, Tauno fired again.

The bolt hit the ork in the gut with another spray of blood and tissue, but the alien kept advancing. It returned fire, spraying bullets just past Tauno, one of the rounds ripping a burning wound across his shoulder. The trooper fired again, ignoring the sudden pain, holding his breath, every muscle in his body clenched with fear.

The bolt took the ork clean between the eyes, blowing its head apart. Its companion lumbered into a run, ripping a stick grenade from its belt. Even as it hooked the grenade's ring over a tusk to pull it free, a salvo of three bolts screamed in from Tauno's left, forming a neat triangle of detonations in the ork's chest.

Tauno glanced across and saw one of the Devastator Marines, one foot up on the remnants of the barricade, smoke drifting from the muzzle of his bolter. The Space Marine raised his weapon in salute and turned back to the others fighting down the slope.

Someone else staggered out of the darkness. Tauno did not recognise him at first, half his face swathed with blood from a cut across his forehead. The moustaches gave it away as the man limped into the light of the guttering fires.

'Sergeant Maikon!'

The staff sergeant almost fell against Tauno, one arm draping across the trooper's shoulders.

'Got yourself a pretty little pistol there, lad,' said Maikon. 'Saw what you did just now. You should be proud. I think you've done enough for now.'

'I still have two rounds left, sergeant,' protested Tauno.

'Save 'em for later,' said Maikon. 'Let's get you looked at.'

Now that the sergeant mentioned Tauno's injuries, he became aware of the throbbing pain in his head and the harsh cut across his arm. Letting one arm drop with the weight of the bolt pistol, he reached up to the back of his head with the other. He took a sharp intake of breath at his own touch. He could feel pieces of bone moving around in the wetness of the blood.

He felt faint and Maikon shifted his weight, helping the trooper to stay on his

feet.

'How bad is it sergeant?' Tauno asked. 'Am I going to die?'

'I reckon you will need to wear a hat to catch the ladies' eyes, because you're going to have the Emperor's own bald spot to cover up; but I reckon you'll be all right.'

Tauno was feeling quite nauseated now. He swallowed hard to stop himself from throwing up.

'I'd like to sit down, sergeant, but we should get back to the fighting.'

'You need to pay more attention, lad.'

Maikon helped Tauno over to a rock and lowered him down gently to rest against it. From here, Tauno could see the glow of dawn in the far distance. The ground was trembling under his backside and he wondered if he was imagining it. But the smell of fumes and the rumbling of engines were unmistakable.

Lolling his head to the north, he saw grey-painted tanks cresting the ridge, their main guns booming. Shells ripped through the advancing orks while lascannons and heavy bolters spat death in the pre-dawn twilight. Transports were disgorging dozens of Free Militia onto Koth Ridge. Everywhere Tauno looked the orks were falling back from the fury of the Piscinan counter-attack.

He wondered why he hadn't noticed them before; he had been quite busy, he realised.

'Have we won, sergeant?' he asked.

'Yes, trooper, we've won the battle.'

The staff sergeant looked down the ridge and Tauno followed his gaze. All along the ridgeline, the surviving defence troopers were slumping to the ground in exhaustion, patting each other on the back, drinking from canteens or tending to the many corpses that littered the slope.

A transport slewed to a halt not far from Tauno and the upper hatch popped open. Colonel Grautz emerged and surveyed the scene with a pair of magnoculars. Satisfied with what he saw, he hung the magnoculars around his neck and looked down at the troopers gathering around.

'A glorious fight, men!' the colonel said. 'You have the greatest thanks from Imperial Commander Sousan. I am sure that each of you will be praised and rewarded highly for your efforts here and over the last few days. Though we cannot be complacent, it is fair to say that the ork threat to Piscina has been defeated. The Dark Angels will be here soon to help us clear out the rest. Time for a couple of days' recuperation for you all. Well done for winning the war!'

The transport moved on, heading after the line of tanks. Ahead of them the

Space Marines were pushing forwards, harrying the orks as they fled from the armoured vehicles.

'You know who really won this war?' Tauno said. Maikon nodded, and pulled his canteen from his belt. He raised it in toast to the dark-green-armoured figures continuing their relentless fight.

'Emperor bless the Astartes,' murmured Tauno.

The swish of the fan overhead was the only sound Tauno could hear. He lay with his eyes closed, tucked up tight in the blanket, the infirmary bed solid and supportive beneath him. After the nightmare of Koth Ridge, the quiet and solitude were a blessing from the Emperor Himself; almost literally, as he was being tended to by sisters of the Order Hospitaller.

Footsteps slapped on the tiled floor, their pace measured, the gap too long for a normal man's tread: the footsteps of a Space Marine.

Tauno opened his eyes and sat up. Sergeant Ophrael ducked his bulky frame through the doorway. He was dressed in a heavy, sleeveless robe of dark green, but out of his armour he was no less impressive, a mass of tanned flesh, muscle and cord-like veins. He had a surprisingly young-looking face, square-jawed with close-cropped blond hair and penetrating green eyes. The Space Marine strode up the ward, the curious buzz of the other patients surrounding him.

Tauno sighed.

'I knew it was too good to be true,' he said to Ophrael, pushing back the blanket to sit up. 'I have to go back to the fighting, don't I?'

'One day,' replied the Space Marine, pulling the blanket back into place. 'Orks are notorious for being difficult to eradicate. The defence force will have more to do than ceremonial parades for years to come, I am sure. That is not why I am here.'

'Oh?'

The Space Marine looked a little awkward as he reached out and opened his fist. In his palm lay a small chunk of something; it was a few centimetres across, of a light grey material, blackened on one side.

'This is for you,' said Ophrael. He passed the object to Tauno, who took it gingerly.

'What is it?' asked the trooper.

'I told Master Belial of what happened during the second defence of Koth Ridge. He was moved by your actions and felt it was important that the Dark Angels recognise your bravery and your dedication. We have no military title or

medal suitable for non-Astartes, but there is a term we have for men who have served the Chapter well. You may call yourself a Son of Caliban.'

'Thank you,' said Tauno, taken aback but still confused. 'And this is?'

Ophrael smiled, but it was a sad smile.

'A Son of Caliban gets no physical reward, but I thought that you might like this.' The Astartes closed Tauno's hand around the object, the action surprisingly delicate for his massive fingers. 'It is a piece of Sergeant Naaman's armour. I see that in you, his example to us all lived on. Mount it in gold, put it on a shelf, lock it in a vault; it is yours to do with as you wish. Simply remember what it is and the cost it carries.'

Tauno had to blink back tears and his voice was almost a sob as he thought of the Space Marine who had spoken to him once to ask his name; and, amongst many others, given his life for every person on Piscina.

'Do your duty and fight as if the Emperor Himself watches you…'

# THE TALE OF BELIAL

## AFTERMATH

Storm clouds swathed the heights of Kadillus, fierce rain lashing down upon the rocks, a gale bending the stunted trees. Rivulets of water gushed between the rocks of Barrak Gorge, sending broken branches and small rocks tumbling down the defile. The downpour was a steady drum on the hull of the Rhino as it slewed to a stop in the mud.

Belial took his storm bolter from the weapons rack as the ramp lowered. He followed his command squad out into the gorge, booted feet sinking into the mire, his robe spattered with splashing mud as the other Dark Angels squads formed up around their commander.

'Enemy signals confined to the power station, brother-captain,' Hephaestus reported from the gunship overhead. A flash of lightning broke the gloom, followed quickly by a crack of thunder. 'Unable to determine number, interference from the geothermal station blocking surveyor sweeps. Impossible to engage at the current time. Atmospheric conditions worsening.'

'Confirm, brother,' replied Belial. 'Return to Northport. There is no advantage in risking our last Thunderhawk here.'

'Acknowledge. Returning to Northport.'

The Space Marine squads fanned out across the gorge, taking up positions amongst the rocks and ruins, weapons trained on the power station ahead. A Predator trundled between the boulders, turret playing left and right as the gunner searched for the enemy. Belial magnified his autosenses and scanned the mine head and station, looking for the orks. Here and there a thermal signature registered, but there were no clear targets.

'*Bellum vigilus et decorus operandi.*' Belial advanced slowly, waving the three Tactical squads forwards, covered by the guns of the Devastators and Predator.

The water sluicing down the gulley had piled bodies against the rocks: human and alien, heaped together without distinction. Belial spared the mangled corpses the slightest glance as he strode carefully amongst the debris of battle.

The Dark Angels had advanced to within two hundred metres of the geothermal station when the orks opened fire.

Energy blasts from looted lascannons speared down the gorge while a hail of bullets rattled from stone and plascrete. One lascannon shot scored a welt across the hull of the Predator, which returned fire immediately, lancing the station with its own lascannons, its heavy bolters erupting with a furious salvo. The Devastators added their own fusillade to the fire, bolts and plasma blasts streaking through the rain.

'Secure the perimeter, full charge!' roared Belial, breaking into a run.

The commander and his squad pounded up the slope, sparing no time to fire. He hurdled the remnants of a barricade that had been built by the Free Militia, crushing a body as he landed. Cowed by the ferocious supporting fire, the orks were driven into cover, rattling off sporadic and ineffectual bursts as the Dark Angels swiftly closed across the open ground.

Slowing as he neared the sprawling mass of generators and transformers, Belial spied a group of orks on a gantry above him. He stopped and brought up his storm bolter, its targeter linking to his autosenses as he placed his finger on the trigger. Seven target reticules sprang into view a moment before he opened fire. The bolts ripped through the thin wall of corrugated metal protecting the greenskins, as fire from the rest of his squad rattled between the steel beams and punched through rockcrete bricks.

Ruined ork bodies toppled from the walkway onto the ferrocrete apron. To the left and right, the sound of more bolter fire echoed from the blocky substations. The comm crackled with reports from the squad leaders.

An explosion just ahead drew Belial's attention. By its pitch, he identified it as the detonation of an ork grenade. He broke into a loping run, drawing his power sword.

'Be alert for mines and traps, brothers,' came a warning from Sergeant Lemael. 'Danger minimal.'

Belial ran straight into a mob of orks attempting to outflank the squads to his left by cutting between two arcing generator coils. He fell upon them with a roar, storm bolter spewing rounds. Startled, the orks turned to face the company commander, their weapons spraying bullets wildly around him. A plasma blast incinerated one of the greenskins in a flash of pale blue energy a moment before

Belial was amongst them, power sword hacking and slashing. He dashed in the skull of a greenskin with the butt of his storm bolter and chopped the leg from another with his glowing blade. Something crashed against his backpack and he turned to confront an ork raising a double-handed cleaver for another blow. Charon's force staff smashed into the greenskin's chest with an eruption of psychic energy. The ork flew backwards into an energy relay, sparks exploding from its juddering body.

With the perimeter breached, the Dark Angels pressed on to the central buildings, but met little resistance. The few orks they encountered were poorly armed and easily overcome. Within five minutes of the assault beginning, the Barrak Gorge geothermal station was in the hands of the Dark Angels.

While the other squads conducted a secondary sweep to ensure all enemies had been located, Belial led his command squad out of the power plant. With the fighting over, he had time to analyse what had happened here. Amongst the many dead Free Militia he saw knots of dark green armour.

'Check on our fallen brothers, Nestor,' he said. 'It has been three days, but there may still be survivors.'

The Apothecary headed off as Belial continued to appraise the bloody evidence of the first battle.

'A token garrison, nothing more,' said Charon. He pointed to a group of ork bodies, far more heavily armoured than the others. 'These have the look of a warlord's bodyguard. No such corpses were found at Koth Ridge.'

'The second warlord has escaped,' said Belial. 'For the moment. The teleporter site is still watched by our forces. Even if one has escaped, the Beast is still trapped in Kadillus Harbour.'

Charon seemed distracted. He gazed along the line of defences, eyes narrow, a glow emanating from the cables of his psychic hood. Without word, he set off at a run, heading to the western side of the gorge. Belial headed after him.

'What is it, brother?' Belial asked as the Librarian came to a stop amongst a pile of dead Free Militia.

'Here,' he said, pointing at a black-armoured corpse.

It was Boreas.

'He shall be remembered,' said Belial, kneeling beside the Chaplain.

'You misunderstand me, brother,' said Charon. 'Brother Nestor! We have a survivor!'

Belial looked more closely. Boreas's skin was deathly white, a ragged gash across the side of his head, his armour torn and crumpled in many places.

Switching on his thermal sight, the commander saw the tiniest vestiges of warmth moving along the Space Marine's blood vessels.

He stood up as Nestor approached.

'He is in the grip of his sus-an membrane, brother,' said Nestor, crouching over the fallen Chaplain. 'Life signs are minimal but steady. Cryptobiosis must have happened automatically in response to his injuries. The Orks probably thought he was dead, and thank the Emperor that they did not deal any further damage.'

The Apothecary spent some time examining Boreas before straightening.

'It is best that we leave Brother Boreas in his suspended metabolic state while we return him to the *Unrelenting Fury*, where we can better resuscitate him. He has extensive external and internal injuries, brother-captain, but some augmetics and surgery should suffice to return him to full duty in the fullness of time.'

'Praise the Emperor,' said Charon. 'We have lost many battle-brothers and it is a blessing to have even one of them returned to us.'

'Praise the Emperor indeed, brothers,' said Nestor, humour in his tone. 'The bodies He created for us are proof almost against death itself.'

Leaving Nestor to detail a squad to remove Boreas, Belial walked back to his Rhino. His own injuries ached, perhaps a psychosomatic response to Nestor's words. Alone for the first time in many days, Belial sat in his command chair and removed his helmet. He whispered the verses of a dedication to the Master of Mankind, and a few words of thanks to the primarch of the Dark Angels. It would be three more days before the rest of the Chapter returned; three days to keep Ghazghkull contained in the harbour and a tight watch on the ork teleporter.

They would perhaps be the hardest three days of the whole campaign for Belial. Militarily, they would be straightforward, but with the orks all but defeated, there would soon come the time when his conduct would be examined by Grand Master Azrael.

Charon had spoken words of encouragement, but Belial knew that he had made some bad decisions. The best he hoped for was an acknowledgement of the unique difficulties the Dark Angels had faced on Kadillus. He should have listened to Sergeant Naaman's concerns earlier. Had the teleporter been located before the first attack on Koth Ridge, the orks would not have posed such a threat. Belial did not naturally indulge in hindsight or second-guessing, but he was keenly aware that he had allowed confidence to become arrogance; he had underestimated the ork threat and, in refusing to acknowledge the potential dangers, he had cost the lives of Astartes and thousands of Piscinans. It was likely that he would lose command of the 3rd Company and return to being a

brother of the Deathwing.

Belial pushed aside these morose thoughts. The judgement of Azrael would wait. For the moment, there were still orks on Piscina and the campaign was not yet done.

He activated the comm.

'Master Belial to all units. Free Militia forces are en route to secure the geothermal station. Embark on transports for immediate return to Kadillus Harbour. *Diem victorum non*. The battle continues, brothers.'

A strong sea breeze wafted smoke over the city, bringing with it the crack of artillery, the snap of las-fire and the rattle of bolters. The blackened ruin of the basilica stood proud, its spire hidden by the smog. Much of the city was nothing more than rubble, dust-coated corpses of men and orks buried beneath piles of bricks and shattered girders. The rumble of tank engines reverberated along the streets as a column of Free Militia edged their way through the destruction, flamers scouring the ruins, shells pounding possible enemy hiding places.

As Belial had expected, the orks were not content to sit and wait for the inevitable. Fighting had been fierce, but the combined might of the 3rd Company and Free Militia was keeping the greenskins penned in the area around the docks.

And now the time was fast approaching to crush them.

From the lip of the main apron at Northport, he looked up at the vapour trails of Thunderhawks cutting through the cloudy skies. Far above, the Tower of Angels floated in orbit, the whole Dark Angels fleet in attendance. Transporters and gunships were landing around the city, while others headed to Koth Ridge to reinforce the Free Militia. In the evening twilight, what looked to be shooting stars glittered over the East Barrens: the drop-pods of the 6th Company descending on the East Barrens.

A Thunderhawk bearing the livery of Grand Master Azrael dropped through the cloud, diving sharply for the starport. Belial felt some trepidation as it landed on pillars of plasma fire. The wheeze of servos sounded in his autosenses as Revered Venerari stepped up next to him.

'Your judgement on yourself will be harsher than that of others,' said the Dreadnought.

Belial said nothing as the Thunderhawk touched down. His armour picked up the wash of heat from the gunship's engines and he could hear creaks of cooling metal. With a hiss of hydraulics, the ramp lowered. Beyond the gunship

transporters were dropping down onto the other parts of the docks, carrying Land Raider heavy tanks, Vindicator assault guns and other treasures of the Dark Angels arsenal. The full force of the Chapter was being brought to bear.

Grand Master Azrael, Keeper of the Truth, was the first to disembark. The supreme commander of the Dark Angels wore ornate armour, the insignia of the Chapter and his personal heraldry inlaid with precious gems and rare metals. A small entourage accompanied him down the ramp: Brother Bethor carrying the sacred Standard of Retribution; Space Marines in the livery of Librarians and Interrogator-Chaplains and Techmarines; half-machine servitors; and numerous other functionaries garbed in the robes of Chapter serfs. A cowled figure no more than a metre tall followed close on Azrael's heels, carrying the ornately winged Lion Helm of the Grand Master; a Watcher in the Dark, one of the strange creatures that shared the Tower of Angels with the Chapter.

Azrael's expression was stern, his dark hair close-cropped, deep-set eyes shadowed in the evening sun. Belial detected the buzz of the interpersonal comm and a moment later Charon strode out across the plascrete to welcome the Grand Master.

Belial watched patiently as the two held a long conversation. He noticed Azrael's eyes flicking in his direction on occasion, but could tell nothing of the Grand Master's thoughts. Eventually the two of them parted and Azrael headed in Belial's direction. The company master stepped forwards to meet his superior.

'The blessing of the Lion upon you, Grand Master,' said Belial, sinking to one knee before Azrael. 'I am grateful for your presence.'

'*Non desperat countenanti, exemplar est bellis fortis extremis, mon frater'* replied Azrael, gesturing for Belial to stand. 'I know that you have misgivings about calling to me for aid, brother. Put them from your mind, for there is no shame in what you have done. It takes strength to stand alone against the dark forces of the galaxy; it takes greater strength to admit the need for help.'

Azrael laid a hand upon Belial's shoulder and smiled, a simple gesture that did more to alleviate Belial's concerns than any amount of spoken praise.

'You have done your duty,' Azrael continued. 'To me, to your Chapter, to the Lion and to the Emperor. By your actions, Piscina IV remains safe from the orks, and through that action the world of Piscina V stays free of taint. Future generations of Dark Angels will give thanks to you and your warriors for what their sacrifice has preserved here.'

'I am grateful for your words, Grand Master,' said Belial. 'There are many that deserve praise more than I, none more so than Sergeant Naaman of the Tenth

Company.’

Azrael nodded.

‘Many will be the names recorded in honour for this campaign,’ said the supreme commander. He looked towards the war-torn city. ‘Others may be added to that list before we are finished. You have brought the Beast of Armageddon to battle, now we must finish the task.’

‘Yes, it is time to unleash a storm of vengeance against these foul aliens,’ said Belial. His fist crashed against his chest in salute. ‘What are your orders, Grand Master?’

# EPILOGUE

The sound of shells was growing louder and louder. An explosion ripped the roof from a storage shed at the end of the street, burying a mob of orks under a heap of tiles and bricks.

Ghazghkull shook his head in disappointment; he guessed the humies had retaken the big laser cannon by now. It would only be a matter of time before their ships started blowing up his army from space. After that, they'd start looking for Nazdreg's hulk. Humies would figure that out quick enough, he was sure of it.

'Oi, Makari, grab me banna!' The gretchin appeared as if by magic and plucked the huge flag free from the mound of rubble it had been driven into. 'We's goin' fer a bit of a walk.'

Ghazghkull headed back into the shell of an empty warehouse, the clanking of his armour echoing from the walls. Makari scurried behind, hauling the giant banner with him.

'We's gonna give the humies some more boot levver, boss?' asked the gretchin.

Ghazghkull nodded.

'We'll give the humies plenty of boot levver, but dere's no need ta rush fings.'

The warlord unhooked an unlikely-looking device from his armour. The core of it seemed to be a battered wheel hub, coiled about with lots of coloured wires, with a red button in the middle.

'What'cha got dere, boss?' asked Makari.

'Grab 'old,' said Ghazghkull, holding out the device. 'It's a tellyporta fingy. When I push dis button, we's gonna go back to Nazdreg's 'ulk.'

'What about da rest of da boyz? We ain't runnin' away, is we?'

'Nah, dis ain't runnin' away. Dis is strat-er-jee. Runnin' away's only fer humies

and pointy-ears. We's just leavin' for a bit. Da rest of da boyz is 'avin' fun. We'll let 'em keep da humies bizzy while we do sumfink strat-ee-jik.'

Ghazghkull bashed his fist against the button on the tellyporta device. Green lights glowed into life around the central hub and the thing began to shake in the warlord's grip. Sparks sputtered along the wires and the warlord smelt burning plastic.

'Is it meant to do dat, boss? Is it me–'

The warehouse disappeared and Ghazghkull found himself back in the warp for a moment. Like last time, there were all sorts of strange noises and faces leering at the warlord out of the soupy green miasma. He thought he could hear the guffaws and shouts of Gork (or possibly Mork).

Then they were back in the big room of Nazdreg's hulk. With a puff of smoke, the tellyporta device stopped its shaking; bits of molten metal dropped onto the floor. The hall was almost empty, but the litter of the teeming horde that had been waiting a couple of days before covered the metal floor.

Still in his ornate mega-armour, Nazdreg was standing at one end of the hall, talking to his nobz. He looked up as Ghazghkull appeared in a flash of green light.

'I wundered if dat fing would work,' Nazdreg called out. 'Good ta see ya again.'

Ghazghkull strode up the hall and pushed his way through the Bad Moon leaders.

'Dis tellyporta stuff is all right, Nazdreg,' said Ghazghkull, handing the fried piece of equipment to his fellow warlord.

'I dunno,' replied Nazdreg. 'It's a pain to get da power fer it.'

'Just sum little problems, dat can be worked out,' said Ghazghkull. 'Makes me teef feel funny.'

'Speakin' of teef, dis little trip 'as been most good in da loot stakes,' said Nazdreg. 'Picked up all kinds of great gear from da humies. Plenty of dakka and teef.'

'I didn't too bad meself,' said Ghazghkull. 'Listen, if yoo don't want ta keep da tellyporta, I will take it off yer 'ands.'

'Fer sum extra teef…'

'Course, fer sum extra teef. We 'ad a deal, din't we?'

'If da price is right, da tellyporta is yours. What do ya want wiv it?'

Ghazghkull's mind went back many years, to a world of towering cities and choking wastes. A world that had almost been his, but for one stupid, brave,

remarkable humie. This time he wouldn't go easy on them.

'I never did want dis place anywayz. Dis woz just practice fur da big wun. I've got a score ta settle…'

# ANGELS OF DARKNESS

# THE TALE OF ASTELAN

## PART ONE

With the whine of the shuttle's engines dying behind him, Astelan stood on the landing apron looking at the large, ornate gates in front of him. They were wrought from black metal in the design of a winged sword that was mirrored on each side.

In the dark, cavernous room beyond, he could see ten giant figures swathed in thick white robes. They were standing in the shadows between the guttering circles of flame cast by tall candles set around the chamber's walls. Each figure bore a two-handed sword, held upright across its chest and face, the sharp edges of the weapons glinting in the erratic light. The ruddy glow flickered off thousands of skulls adorning the walls and ceiling of the vast sepulchre, gleaming in eyeless sockets and shining off polished lipless grins. Many were human, but most were not: a mix of subtle, elongated features; brutal, bucket-jawed aliens; eyeless monstrosities; horned, twisted creatures and many other contorted, inhuman stares looked down upon the assembled Dark Angels.

The solitary toll of a bell brought the assembled guard to attention. The great gates in front of Astelan opened inwards, another clanging of the bell drowning out the hiss of hydraulics and creak of ancient hinges, and he took a few steps forward. Suited in his heavy black power armour, he was still taller by a few centimetres than the assembled Space Marines. He wore no helmet, and his dark eyes calmly gauged the gathered warriors from beneath a heavy brow, the candlelight reflecting off his shaved head. He looked back at the Space Marine who had accompanied him on the shuttle, the one who had been referred to as Brother-Chaplain Boreas. He too wore heavy white robes, but unlike the honour guard, Boreas was still armoured. His face was concealed behind a helmet fashioned in the shape of a death's head skull, decorated by tarnished gilding.

The dead eye-lenses of the helmet regarded him without emotion.

'I did not expect an honour guard,' Astelan said, glancing at the Dark Angels who stood unmoving around him.

'You were right not to, they are here to honour me, not you,' Boreas replied quietly and evenly, his tone slightly distorted by his suit's vocal projectors. He then raised his voice to address the others in the room. 'Form up for escort!'

Five of the Space Marines turned and took up position in front of Astelan, while the others fell in behind the newly arrived pair. At another command from Boreas, they started a slow march forwards. Astelan felt Boreas shove him from behind, and he fell into step behind the others. As they passed from the chamber into a wide but low corridor panelled with slabs engraved with names, Astelan felt a flicker of recognition.

'We just passed through the Memorial Gates, did we not?' he asked Boreas, who did not reply. 'I am sure. It all seems so familiar. The reception chamber used to be hung with banners of the families of Caliban whose lords had fallen in battle.'

'Perhaps once, but not any more,' Boreas conceded.

'But how can that be? I saw from the transport that this is not Caliban, it is some form of space station,' Astelan said. 'And the Memorial Gates were used to get to the tombs in the catacombs beneath the citadel. It was a place for the dead.'

'That is correct,' Boreas said.

Perturbed and confused, Astelan carried on in silence as the Dark Angels led him further and further into the bowels of the disturbing place. Their journey was lit by torches that burned with smokeless flame, held in sconces at regular intervals along the walls. Other corridors branched left and right, and Astelan knew from memory that they were passing through the tombs of the ancient rulers of Caliban. And yet he could not reconcile the sight he had seen upon his arrival with his memories. He was on an armoured fortress hanging in space – he had seen the many towers and emplacements built upon what he had taken to be a gigantic asteroid.

They turned left and right on occasion, weaving through the labyrinth of tunnels, surrounded by tablets proclaiming the names of Dark Angels who had died in heroic combat. They seemed to go on forever in all directions. Underfoot, the dust was thick, having lain undisturbed for many years, perhaps decades or centuries. Small alcoves set into the walls held relics of the past – ornately decorated shoulder pads, the hilt and half the blade of a broken power sword,

engraved skulls, a tarnished gauntlet, glass-fronted ossuaries displaying the bones of those who had fallen in battle, a plaque beneath declaring who they were in life. He felt draughts and chill breezes on his face emanating from side chambers, and occasionally heard a distant sigh, or the clank of a chain, all of which added to the macabre aura of the crypt, which did little to ease Astelan's unsettled mind.

Turning right at one particular junction, a peripheral movement caught Astelan's eye and he glanced to his left. In the shadows he saw a diminutive being, no higher than his waist, almost hidden in the darkness. It was little more than a small robe, but from the depths of the black hood two eyes glittered with a cold, blue light as the strange creature regarded Astelan. As suddenly as he had spotted it, the watcher in the dark faded back into the shadows and was gone.

His confusion growing as they continued to march into the bowels of the sepulchre, it took Astelan a moment to realise that they had stopped. The other Dark Angels turned and filed out by the way they had entered, leaving him and Boreas in a circular chamber roughly two dozen metres across, its circumference lined with windowless iron doors. All of the doors were closed except one, and Boreas directed Astelan towards it with a pointing finger.

Astelan hesitated for a moment and then strode forwards into the room beyond. He stopped suddenly as soon as he entered, stunned by what he found inside.

The room was not large, barely five metres square, lit by a brazier in the far corner. A stone slab dominated the centre of the room, pierced by iron rings from which hung heavy chains, and to one side a row of shelves was stacked with various metal implements that menacingly caught the light of the glowing coals. There were two more robed Space Marines awaiting them, their faces hidden by heavy hoods, their hands concealed beneath studded metal gauntlets. As one took a step forward, Astelan caught a glimpse of bony white under his hood.

The door slammed shut behind Astelan and he turned to see Boreas had stepped inside. The Chaplain removed his skull-faced helmet and held it under his arm. His piercing eyes regarded Astelan just as coldly as the flat features of the armoured skull had done. Like Astelan, his head was also shaven and marked with faint scars. His left cheek was tattooed with a winged sword, Chapter symbol of the Dark Angels, and his forehead pierced with service studs.

'You are charged as a traitor to the Emperor and Lion El'Jonson, and I, as an Interrogator-Chaplain of the Dark Angels Chapter, am here to administer your salvation,' Boreas intoned. Astelan laughed harshly at the man's overly sombre tone, the sound echoing off the bare stone walls.

‘You shall be my saviour?’ snarled Astelan. ‘And what right do you have to judge me?’

‘Repent the sins of your past, accept the error of your Lutherite ways, and your salvation shall be swift,’ Boreas said, ignoring Astelan’s scorn.

‘And if I do not?’ asked Astelan.

‘Then your salvation shall be long and arduous,’ Boreas replied, pointedly glancing at the blades, tongs and brands on the shelf.

‘Has the glory of the Dark Angels been so forgotten that you are reduced to barbarian torturers?’ Astelan spat. ‘The Dark Angels are warriors, shining knights of battle. And yet, here you skulk in the shadows, turning upon your own.’

‘Do you not repent of your actions?’ Boreas asked again. His face was intent, and his voice was tinged with anger.

‘I have committed no wrong,’ Astelan replied. ‘I refuse to answer your charges, and I refuse to acknowledge your right to accuse me thus.’

‘Very well, then we shall endeavour to relieve you of the burden on your soul,’ Boreas stated with another glance at his torturer’s instruments. ‘If you will not repent freely and earn a swift death, then we must exorcise the sin from your soul with pain and misery. The choice is yours.’

‘There is not one here amongst you who could lighten the weight I have borne upon my shoulders,’ Astelan declared. ‘And there is not one in this room who shall lay a finger upon me without violence.’

‘That is but the latest error of judgement you have made.’ Boreas smiled grimly and gestured to one of the other Dark Angels. ‘Brother-Librarian Samiel shall set you right.’

The Space Marine pulled back his hood to reveal a dark, weathered face. Tattooed above his right eye was the winged sword symbol, its pommel in the shape of a glaring eye. His head was also shaven to the scalp, and criss-crossed with scars and branding marks. There was movement in Samiel’s eyes, and it took a moment for Astelan to realise that they were tiny sparks of psychic power.

Astelan took a step towards Boreas, fists raised to attack.

‘*Arcanatum energis!*’ Samiel spat. Blue bolts of lightning leapt from the psyker’s fingertips and struck Astelan full in the chest, hurling him across the room to slam into the wall. Ancient stone cracked and splintered under the impact and Astelan grimaced with pain from the blow. Flickers of blue sparks danced over his armour for a few more heartbeats as he pushed himself to his feet.

‘You call me traitor, you who have brought a witch into your own ranks!’ Astelan growled between gritted teeth, staring with loathing at Boreas.

‘Be still!’ Samiel barked, his voice cutting into Astelan’s mind, hammering at his senses as much as the psychic bolt had hammered into his body. He resisted for only the briefest of moments before he felt the strength sapped from his limbs and he slumped within his armour, its servos whining to keep him upright.

‘*Sleep!*’ Samiel exerted his will again, and this time Astelan’s resistance was stronger and he fought off the urge to close his eyes for several seconds. His gaze caught that of the Librarian, and in that moment, the full force of the psyker’s mind was unleashed. Astelan felt his own thoughts being twisted into a whirl, his vision spun and a roaring filled his ears. He tried desperately to shake himself free of Samiel’s burning gaze, but could not move. His attention was locked and he felt his will draining away, leeching into the witchfires that burned in the psyker’s eyes.

‘Sleep…’ Samiel repeated and Astelan fell into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, Astelan was not surprised to find himself chained to the interrogation slab. Looking at the thick links of iron binding his legs and arms, he knew instantly that even with his prodigiously enhanced strength he would have little chance of breaking his bonds. He had been stripped of his armour, and he lay naked upon the stone table. His skin was tight across his corded muscles, marked by dozens of surgery scars where he had undergone his transformation into a Space Marine. Across his chest and abdomen a second skin glistened a dull black, broken in places by steel fittings for wires and cables, which allowed him to interact with his power armour when armed for battle. Now the metal sockets and circuits lay dormant, and his body felt cold where they pierced his flesh.

Glancing around the room, Astelan found himself alone. He wondered how long it would be before his torturers arrived. It mattered not, he knew well that he could block out whatever pain they dared visit upon him. Pain was a weakness, and as a Space Marine of the Dark Angels, he had no weaknesses. He reminded himself, as he lay there waiting, that he had suffered many wounds in battle and had continued to fight on. Even now, fettered in the prison of those who had forsaken the heritage he had left them, he would continue that fight.

Others had warned him that the Dark Angels were not as they had always been, that they were now ruled by suspicion and secrecy, but he had not truly believed them. Had he realised what they intended, he would never have surrendered

himself to them on Tharsis. He had spent the last few weeks in a state of constant turmoil. First, the Dark Angels had attacked the world he had commanded, forcing him to fight back. It was only after considerable bloodshed that, against the advice of his subordinates, Astelan had relented in his defiance and allowed his attackers entry to his bunker.

The first Space Marines he had seen had seemed very wary, and were confused. Soon they were recalled and the Chaplain, Boreas, had arrived, flanked by Space Marines in white heavy Terminator armour. The unconventional form of their livery and the barbaric decorations of bones and feathers had only added to Astelan's confusion, as had the term Boreas had used to describe them – the Deathwing. He had not resisted, in his ignorance, when they had manacled his hands with thick chains of titanium, so that even in his armour he could not break the links. A gunship, also in the colours of the Deathwing, had landed directly outside his command centre and as he was hurried on board he saw no sign of any other Space Marines.

From then on, he had been kept in total isolation. When he had been transferred from the gunship to a cell aboard the Dark Angels vessel he had been hooded with a black sack, his mouth gagged with thick cord. He had received no contact other than when Boreas had introduced himself and brought him food and water. Astelan was unsure how long the journey had taken, several weeks at least, before Boreas had returned with the gag and the hood, and the shuttle had brought him to the hidden landing pad.

Now he was due to be tortured by those who falsely imprisoned him. He knew that in their ignorance they thought him a traitor, and in their own superstitious way they believed they were saving his soul. It was a mockery of everything he held dear, of everything the Dark Angels once represented to the galaxy. As his anger grew, Astelan resolved to show them the error of their ways, to demonstrate to them how far they had fallen from grace in the eyes of the Emperor.

While he waited, Astelan let himself fall into a trance, calming his mind. As he had been trained to do, he detached himself from his physical body, allowing the catalepsean node implanted into the base of his brain to control his mental functions. In a partial slumber, he remained aware of his surroundings and alert to any threat, but his brain also rested itself, redirecting neural signals from dormant areas to those still awake.

In his dreamlike state, his perceptions shifted focus, so that the room became bright and full of colour for a few minutes, before turning stark and grey as his

consciousness transferred through the different lobes of his brain. Sound came and went, memories flooded his mind and then were lost, and he felt as if he were floating in the air, swiftly followed by the crushing weight of the air pressure around him. Through all this, the inner eye of his mind watched the door, awaiting the return of his jailers.

Astelan was aware that a considerable time had passed, perhaps several hours, and he eased himself back into full consciousness. His augmented hearing picked up the sound of approaching footfalls from outside the room. It had been this that had pricked his subconscious mind, forcing him to return from his mesmerised state. With a rattle of heavy keys, the lock was turned with a loud clanking, and the door swung open. Boreas entered, followed by Samiel, and the Chaplain swung the door shut behind him. He had divested himself of his armour and now wore a plain white robe, its front opened to reveal the Space Marine's massively muscled chest.

Boreas turned and hung the keys on a hook by the door.

'I hope you used your time of solitary peace to consider your thoughts carefully,' Boreas began, standing to Astelan's right. Astelan watched Samiel circle the room to stand on the other side of him.

'Your threats are meaningless to me, surely even you can understand that,' Astelan replied, turning his head to meet Boreas's gaze.

'If you will not recant your evil deeds, we must proceed according to the ancient traditions of my office,' Boreas intoned, beginning the ritual of interrogation. 'Tell me your name.'

'I am Chapter Commander Merir Astelan,' he replied with a note of indignity in his voice. 'Your treatment of me has taken no account of my esteemed rank.'

'And who do you serve?' Boreas asked.

'I once served the Emperor's Dark Angels Space Marine Legion,' Astelan told the Chaplain, dropping his gaze to the floor.

'Once served? Who do you serve now?' Boreas demanded, stepping forward.

'I was betrayed by my own lords,' Astelan replied after a moment of painful recollection, still avoiding Boreas's stare. 'They turned their backs on me, but I have endeavoured to continue the great task that the Emperor created me for.'

'And what is that great task?' Boreas leaned close, his eyes narrowing as he glared at Astelan.

'That mankind might rule the galaxy, without fear of threat from within or without,' Astelan replied fiercely, meeting the Interrogator-Chaplain's stare. 'To

fight proudly at the forefront of battle against the alien and the ignorant.'

'And so how is it that you fought against the Space Marines of the Dark Angels on the world of Tharsis?' Boreas asked.

'Once more I was betrayed by the Dark Angels, and again I had to fight to defend myself and to protect what you would unwittingly destroy.' Astelan raised his head to look straight at the Interrogator-Chaplain, and the Chaplain recognised the hatred in his eyes.

'You enslaved a world to your own selfish whims and needs!' Boreas spat, reaching down and clamping a hand around Astelan's throat. The muscles in the prisoner's neck corded as he fought back against the pressure of the Dark Angel's powerful fingers. There was loathing in Boreas's voice when he spoke next. 'You betrayed everything you were sworn to uphold! Admit it!'

Astelan said nothing as the two gazed venomously at each other. For several minutes, they were locked together in their mutual disgust, until Boreas eventually eased his grip and stood back.

'Tell me how you came to be on Tharsis,' the Chaplain said, crossing his arms, acting as if he had not just been trying to squeeze the life out of the man chained in front of him. Astelan took a few deep breaths to steady himself.

'Tell me but one thing,' Astelan said, glancing first at Boreas and then at Samiel. 'Tell me where I am, how this place can be so familiar and yet so different, and I may consider listening to your accusations.'

'Has he not yet worked it out?' Samiel said, looking in amazement at Astelan. There was a flicker of a frown on the Chaplain's face before he looked down at his prisoner.

'You are in the Tower of Angels, renegade,' Boreas said.

'That cannot be so,' protested Astelan, trying to sit up but raising his head only a little against the strength of the chains. 'I saw nothing of Caliban when we approached. This cannot be our fortress. Why do you mock me?'

'There is no mockery,' Samiel said quietly. 'This fortress is all that is left of our homeworld of Caliban.'

'Lies!' Astelan declared, trying to sit up, his muscles bulging as he fought against the chains. 'This is just a trick!'

'You know we speak the truth,' Boreas said, forcing Astelan down again with a hand on his chest. His eyes bored into Astelan's as he spoke his next words: 'This is all that remains of Caliban, our homeworld that your treachery destroyed.'

No one spoke for several minutes as Astelan absorbed this information. A chill began to seep into his flesh from the stone slab he lay on. Astelan watched his breath coalescing into a faint mist in the air as he breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling quickly. In all the years he had sought out information of his former masters, he had never heard of such a catastrophic event taking place. Perhaps it was a trick to weaken his resolve? He fast dismissed the notion though, as he considered the evidence he had witnessed since his arrival.

He was indeed in the catacombs below what had once been the glorious fortress of the Dark Angels Chapter, now somehow ripped from the planet and sent into space. It was this thought that prompted him to speak.

'Is this why you attacked me, unprovoked, on Tharsis?' Astelan asked, 'Was it misplaced revenge for the loss you have suffered, to destroy my new home?'

'Your new home?' Boreas repeated scornfully. 'A world full of soldiers and slaves, all sworn to be loyal to you. Can you not admit the heresy of your actions?'

'Has it now become heresy to rule a world in the Emperor's name? Is it wrong of me to command an army again, as I once did?' Astelan said, looking first at Boreas, and then quickly at Samiel.

'We were created to serve mankind, not to rule them,' Boreas rasped, leaning forward and wiping a bead of sweat from Astelan's brow with his thumb.

'You deny that we ruled Caliban?' laughed Astelan. 'You forget that a million serfs toiled in the fields of our homeworld to keep us clothed and fed, and in the forges and machine shops to arm us, and on our ships and in the factories.'

'A world does not exist to be enslaved to a single Space Marine,' Boreas said.

'We are all slaves of a kind, some of us willingly serve the Emperor, and some must be forced to,' Astelan told him.

'And which are you?' Samiel asked suddenly, stepping forward. 'Was it not you and your kind who refused to serve, taking it upon yourselves to usurp the Lion and betray the Dark Angels?'

'Never!' spat Astelan, thrashing at his bonds. 'It is the rest of mankind who betrayed us! I watched you fight on Tharsis, and I was appalled. My armies were great, worthy to be led by the Emperor himself, and trained well, but against the might of the Dark Angels that I fought alongside, the battle would have been swiftly lost. Now, they have pulled your teeth, scattered you across the stars. This I have learnt these last two hundred years.'

'You are wrong,' argued Boreas, pacing back and forth, his eyes locked on Astelan's like a predator. 'The Legions were broken up so that no single man

could wield that kind of power again.'

'An act done by weak-willed men who were jealous of us, and afraid of what we were,' said Astelan, moving his head to keep Boreas in sight. 'I commanded a thousand Space Marines, just one of many Dark Angels Chapter commanders, and whole worlds fell before our wrath. I would have taken Tharsis in a single day, but you waged war upon me for ten times as long.'

'The power you wielded has corrupted you, as it has corrupted many others,' Boreas said, turning away. 'It was that temptation that could not be allowed to exist.'

'Corrupt? You call *me* corrupt?' Astelan was shouting now, his voice ringing around the small cell. 'It is you who have become corrupted, hiding out in this dark cell, slinking in the shadows, afraid of the power you possess. I remember this place as one of celebration and victory. A hundred banners flew from the towers, and the great festivals lit these rooms with fires by the thousand as we revelled in our glories. I remember when the Dark Angels cut across the galaxy as the Emperor's own sword. We were the first and greatest, never forget that! We never once knew defeat as we followed the Emperor, and even when we were given Caliban and El'Jonson became our leader, we were still the lords of battle. It was that time of glory that we should be living in again. We exist for battle, and I forged an army to continue the Great Crusade.'

'The Great Crusade ended ten thousand years ago, when you and others like you turned on the Emperor and tried to destroy all that he had built,' Samiel said. Boreas still looked away, brooding silently.

'I do not accept your accusations,' replied Astelan. Again the cell was silent for a while, until Boreas turned and loomed over the slab, arms crossed over his bulky chest, his biceps straining the cloth of his robe. 'If you are not a traitor, then explain why you commanded your army to resist us on Tharsis,' the Interrogator-Chaplain asked calmly.

'You left me little choice,' Astelan replied bitterly. 'I had reports from my ships and outposts of a vessel breaking from the warp, and I sent them to investigate. Your strike vessel opened fire without replying to their hails, destroying one of my ships. It is only natural that others in the patrol should attack, when assaulted without provocation. You showed no mercy, killing nearly a thousand of my men!'

'And yet, when the battle-brothers landed and you saw that it was the Dark Angels you faced, you did not surrender, nor order your army to give us free passage,' Boreas continued.

‘I told them to resist at all costs!’ spat Astelan.

‘It was your guilt that commanded them!’ roared Boreas. ‘Fear of facing justice for your evil deeds!’

‘I did it to preserve what I had created,’ Astelan replied, his voice dropping to a whisper. ‘Once before, the misguided had turned their guns upon our great works. I would not allow it to happen again.’

‘What great works?’ sneered Boreas. ‘A world that laboured for your pride? Ten million souls in chains to fuel your ambition? Indentured workers, conscript soldiers, all the fettered minions of your greed.’

‘I have learnt that the realm of the Emperor stretches over more than a million worlds,’ explained Astelan, as he pictured the vast factory-cities of Tharsis. ‘The numbers of humanity are beyond counting, millions of billions of them teeming across star systems, in space ports and on ships. Crammed atop each other in the hive cities, scattered beneath the rocks of the mining worlds, imprisoned in floating reformatories. I say again that we are all slaves to the will of the Emperor.’

‘To the Emperor perhaps, but not to you,’ countered Boreas. ‘You were created to serve, not to rule. You are a warrior, not a governor. It is your duty to obey and to fight, nothing more.’

‘I am an instrument of the Emperor’s will, his weapon and his symbol,’ Astelan replied, looking again at his interrogator. ‘How can you not see the hypocrisy in your own words? You accuse me of resisting you. How could I not, when your gunships razed the fields that fed my people, when your cannons destroyed their farms and towns, when your battle-brothers slaughtered them like livestock at the cull?’

‘We did what your actions forced us to do,’ Boreas said, pointing an accusing finger at Astelan. ‘It was your arrogance that brought misery and destruction upon the servants of the Emperor. It was you that sent them against us. It was you that condemned them to death, sacrificing their lives to protect yourself. You are a traitor, you have destroyed everything you have come across. Your sins have cursed you so that death and blood follow in your wake.’

‘My army fought bravely to the end, as I had trained them to,’ Astelan said, closing his eyes. He could picture his troops parading through the capital, thousands of them in rank after rank, banners held high, the martial drumbeat accompanied by the crash of booted feet. He remembered their last stand at the command bunker, as they threw themselves at the enemies outside, swamping them with their bodies. Not one had spoken of surrender, not one of them had

baulked at their duty. ‘It was their love for the Emperor that drove them to such acts of desperation. It was their fear of what you represent that gave them the strength to continue, to thwart your parasitic plans.’

‘You call us parasites! Who lived in luxury while the people of your world starved and your soldiers fought over scraps?’ Boreas shook his head as he spoke. ‘You are an abomination, an abhorrent travesty of a Space Marine. Where you see strength, I see cruelty. Where you profess to greatness, I see despotism of the worst kind. Your heresies are beyond comprehension. Just admit to your sins, cleanse your soul of their burden, and you shall be free.’

‘You call this freedom?’ Astelan laughed bitterly, nodding to the instruments of torture on the shelves. ‘You call this the Emperor’s works? The Dark Angels were the first, the proudest Legion. We carved a path of light across the stars in the Emperor’s name, and now you surround yourself with shadows and deceit. Your mighty warriors ravage a planet for a single man, whilst star systems fall to the alien and the unclean.’

‘You dare to accuse me!’ Boreas spat the words. ‘I swear by the Lion and the Emperor, you will admit your crimes and repent your sins. I will learn everything you have done, every wrong deed, every evil act you have committed.’

‘I shall tell you nothing!’ Astelan insisted.

‘You are lying,’ Samiel said, staring into Astelan’s eyes. ‘You are afraid. There are secrets locked inside your mind, knowledge you would try to keep from us.’

‘Get thee behind me, warlock!’ Astelan roared, the chains biting deep into his flesh as he tried to lunge at the psyker. ‘Do not pollute my soul with your magic.’

‘Your soul is already polluted,’ Boreas said, pushing Astelan’s head back against the sweat-covered stone of the slab and holding him there. ‘You have but one chance to save it, and I offer you that chance. Repent of your Lutherite ways, beg forgiveness from the Lion and the Emperor. Your life is forfeit, but your soul can still be saved. Confess your wickedness and salvation shall be yours without pain, without regret. Resist and I shall be forced to save you from yourself.’

‘Do your worst, torturer,’ Astelan said slowly, closing his eyes and turning away from Boreas.

‘It is Interrogator-Chaplain, and I do not need your fear, only your compliance,’ Boreas said, turning away and crossing the cell to the shelves.

He picked up a brand, its head shaped as the double-headed Imperial eagle. He

walked slowly to the brazier and held the brand in the flames, turning it occasionally to heat it evenly. Lifting it, he blew softly on the head, the dull glow burning brighter, wisps of smoke dissipating into the air. He held the brand hovering over Astelan's right arm, and he could feel the heat from it prickling his skin.

'Have Space Marines become so weak over the cold millennia that they fear fire, that mere burning will cause them pain?' Astelan sneered.

'There will be little pain to start with,' Boreas explained. 'But even you, physically perfect and yet spiritually corrupt, will begin to feel the touch of the flame, the caress of the blade, after the hundredth day, the thousandth day. Time is inconsequential. The purification of the soul is not an instant and rash process. It is a long, arduous road, and you and I shall travel it together.'

Astelan gritted his teeth as the brand burned into his shoulder, filling his nostrils with the stench of charring flesh.

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## PART ONE

The flames from the immense fire leapt high into the night sky, bathing the natural amphitheatre in a warm red glow. The circular wall of rock rose over a hundred metres into the sky, an ancient volcanic caldera several hundred metres across that was pock-marked with dozens of cave dwellings accessed by an intricate web of rope ladders and bridges.

The constant pounding of drums echoed off the surrounding cliffs, resonating with the howling chants of the gathered villagers dancing and leaping around the central fire. Strange six- and eight-legged beasts turned on long spits over the many fire pits dug into the arena's floor, the smell of roasting flesh mixing with the aromatic smoke of the ritual pyre.

From the rim of the caldera the jungle spread out for many kilometres. As the noise and light of the barbaric celebrations dissipated with distance, they were replaced by the hisses and growls of nocturnal predators, the alarmed shrieks of their prey and the constant stirring of the wind through the thick dark jungle canopy. Above the treetops, the night sky spread across the heavens, layered with thick clouds of sulphurous smoke from Piscina V's many volcanoes. The underbelly of the clouds was lit with a constant red hue from the glow of the planet's countless volcanoes, as rivers of molten rock poured continuously over the world, sweeping away tracts of jungle in fiery outbursts of the planet's inner turmoil.

A tiny pinprick of light appeared in the gloomy heavens, bright yellow and moving fast. It swiftly blossomed into a crisp glow as it neared, and the roaring of the gunship's engines barked out over the sound of the wind. Plasma engines trailing fire, the Thunderhawk dived steeply towards the jungle, vaporous whirls trailing from the tips of its stubby wings, its blunt, faceted prow cleaving

forcefully through the dense atmosphere.

Alert to any possible danger, multi-barrelled weapons tracked back and forth beneath the gunship's wings as it pulled up from the screaming dive and levelled out barely ten metres above the tops of the trees. The Thunderhawk raced over the heaving sea of flat leaves, its backwash shuddering the upper branches of the jungle as it passed.

The engine roar slowed to a whining growl as the aircraft fiercely braked, the glow of plasma from its main engines dimming, to be replaced by the blue glare of landing thrusters. Descending on azure pillars of flame, the Thunderhawk dropped into the caldera, scattering the terrified tribesmen beneath it as it dropped down from the night sky close to the central fire.

For a moment, panic gripped the villagers who frantically ran to and fro to avoid the burning jets, until their leaders called out, telling them not to be afraid. By the time the gunship settled heavily on its landing feet, sinking deep into the soil that covered the floor of the crater, the chieftain and his best warriors had assembled a welcoming party close to the landing craft. The engines cut out and left a still, tense silence for a few seconds before the front ramp lowered with a grinding of hydraulics.

The ramp reverberated with a clang of heavy booted feet as Boreas stepped out of the Thunderhawk. Clad in his black power armour, he was an imposing sight. Thick plates of dense alloys covered with ablative ceramite protected his entire body. Beneath the crushing weight of the armour, bundles of muscle-like fibres expanded and contracted in response to his every moment, allowing him to move as swiftly as if unencumbered. His skull-helmeted head was flanked by two immense shoulder pads, mounted on actuators that constantly changed their position, allowing him free movement and all-round visibility, but providing a near-impenetrable shield against attack from the flank. All of this was powered by the backpack plugged into the spine of his armour, linked directly into his own nervous system so that he could regulate the power to his suit as effortlessly as he controlled the beating of his twin hearts or the combat stimulants his armour could pump into his bloodstream at a moment's notice.

Even without the strength-boosting properties of his armour, Boreas's genetically enhanced physiology made him many times stronger and faster than a normal human. Armoured for battle he could crush a man's skull in his fist and punch through the armour of a tank. Hundreds of relays within the armour bolstered his already acute senses, feeding him a constant stream of information from extra senses, his specially developed brain assessing them all

subconsciously as a normal man might look with his eyes and hear with his ears.

Boreas paused for a second and looked at the villagers who were gathering close by, the auto-senses of his skull helm casting a red tinge on the proceedings. Olfactory filters allowed him to identify the contents of the atmosphere – mostly oxygen and nitrogen, but with heavy traces of sulphur, carbon from the fires, the sweat of the villagers; all of this he took in without conscious effort.

'*Terrorsight*,' Boreas muttered, his armour's audio pick-up detecting the sub-vocal command. His view blurred and changed. The people of the village now stood out as stark outlines, and he could see their organs and their veins pulsing with life beneath their skin. It took a moment for Boreas's straining eyes to discern the overlapping shapes and colours, until he could make sense of his surroundings again. To the villagers who stared open-mouthed at him, the eyes of his helmet turned from a dull red to a blaze of energy and an awed murmur rippled over the settlement.

Boreas calmly looked around the caldera, his enhanced vision passing through the rock to gaze at the people concealed within the caves, at their crude bedding and furniture all picked out as a maze of grey and green lines. There were few, infants mostly. Satisfied that all was as expected, and that no unseen threat lurked within the tribal settlement, he whispered another command that returned his sight to normal.

Boreas blinked inside his helmet to clear his vision. Even such a short spell of super-enhanced sight had left vague after-images dancing on the edges of his vision. When he had first been gifted with his armour, more finely crafted and filled with auxiliary systems than even standard power armour, he had thought the terrorsight a miracle. However, he had soon learned that to use it for too long could lead to severe disorientation and nausea, despite the many months of training and his centuries of experience.

'Area is secure, follow me,' he stated and his helm transmitted his words to the other Space Marines still within the gunship.

As he strode down the ramp, Boreas was followed by the other members of his small command. The first was Hephaestus, his Techmarine and pilot of the Thunderhawk. His armour was almost as ornate as Boreas's, his chest plate wrought with the design of a two-headed eagle with wings spread, a cog clasped in its claws, the severe green broken only by the red of his left shoulder pad to indicate his special rank. Next came the two battle-brothers, Thumiel and Zaul, who marched down the ramp side-by-side in unison, carrying their boltguns casually, but the constant movement of their helmeted heads betrayed their

unflinching alertness. Last of the group was Nestor, the Apothecary and guardian of their physical well-being. His white armour bulged with fitted equipment, his forearms heavy with sprouting needles and half-concealed phials, and cables that swung heavily from his bulky backpack.

The eldest of the villagers stepped forward and bowed on one knee, followed by the rest of the tribe. He was thin and wiry, but despite his advanced years, his muscles were taut and he moved with fluid grace. He wore a short sarong of thick animal hide, dyed deep red and painted with the image of leaves. His body was covered in blue tattoos across his chest and arms, and over his bald head. Each was made up of small dots and depicted blazing stars, strange nebula swirls, and oddly drawn diagrams of orbital systems and moons. Across his shoulders he wore a long cloak woven from thin vines, studded with tiny barbs that worried at his flesh, leaving his shoulders and back raw and bleeding.

After a long pause of deference, he stood again, his head reaching only as far as Boreas's chest. Gazing up into the severe, stylised skull face, the chieftain smiled, his wrinkled face creasing deeper.

'We are honoured that you visit us again,' he said with a short nod of satisfaction. It took a moment for Boreas to understand the barbarians' dialect of Imperial Gothic, but after listening for a short while his mind translated the more archaic and parochial terms used. 'Twice now in my life the warriors of the stars have visited my people, and twice now they have taken the best of our sons to fight with them.'

'*External address*,' Boreas sub-vocalised, his helmet amplifying his voice so that it reached across the whole village. Reaching into his memory, Boreas recalled the name of the leader of this particular tribe. 'Yes, Hebris, the sons of your people now honour us with their skills and dedication. And now we have come again to choose new warriors for the Emperor beyond the cloud. I trust that you are prepared?'

'As ever, lords,' Hebris said solemnly. 'For long years we have awaited your return, and our best hunters and warriors have looked to the skies for a sign of your coming. A generation of our strongest have passed while your eyes were elsewhere, but the next worthy ascendants are ready to prove themselves to you.'

'That is good,' Boreas said, head tilted to look down at the tattooed scalp of the elder. 'We are ready for the trial to begin.'

'We are always ready, it is a good omen that you visit us today, the twentieth year since my father died and I was given the cloak of thorns,' Hebris said. 'This night shall be remembered by my people for many generations to come. Please,

follow me.’

The group of warriors parted to form a path for their visitors. They were tall and lean, dressed in armour made from the hide of the fierce mutant beasts they hunted in the jungles. It was crudely shaped in imitation of the giant Space Marines who took their bravest young warriors every so often – bulging chestplates, rounded shoulder pads, flared greaves around their legs. Each held a spear tipped with sharpened bone and hung with tufts of fur, feathers and claws taken from their prey.

Their bodies, like their chief’s, were heavily tattooed with stars and suns, symbols of crescent moons and long-tailed comets.

None of their people had seen these things for thousands of years; the night sky was a featureless sheet of cloud to them. The knowledge of their existence had been passed down from their ancestors who had first settled this world more than twenty thousand years before, ten millennia before the coming of the Emperor, in the time known as the Dark Age of Technology.

For hundreds of centuries, Piscina V had been plundered for its rich mineral deposits, the sky polluted with waste, the rivers sucked dry. When the Age of Strife had swept across the ancient galactic empire of mankind, Piscina V had been isolated for thousands of years and over this time the planet reclaimed itself from the human interlopers. The geothermal energy stations that had once leeched energy from the planet’s core had fallen into disrepair and malfunctioned. The planet had been wracked by massive earthquakes that destroyed the mighty cities, killed the population by the million, plunging the world into a new age of barbarism.

Now Piscina V was dominated by immense volcanoes, the belching fumes from their fiery outbursts replacing the smog of a hundred thousand factories.

Hebris led Boreas and the other Space Marines between the two rows of his personal hunters and warriors, while the other villagers crowded close in behind them to get a good look at their otherworldly visitors. They followed the old chieftain as he led them up a shallow ramp that wound around the edge of the crater until it reached a flat platform to an opening some ten metres above the ground level of the caldera.

At the back of the platform was the largest cave opening in the village, flanked by two guards dressed in a similar manner to the warriors who had formed the honour guard, with the addition of helmets fashioned from animal skulls. Inside was a shrine, lit by hundreds of lamps made from the fat of the jungle creatures these people hunted for survival. On ornately carved tables, sacred artefacts from

the prehistory of the tribesmen were kept on display, to be revered by those who would never understand their true origins or workings. They were almost as incomprehensible to Boreas as they were to the chieftain and his people, but he knew enough to recognise them as broken pieces of archeotech.

Most were almost unrecognisable under the thick layers of rust that had gathered despite the best efforts of Hebris's priests to keep them clean. The acidic, humid air of Piscina V was the bane of all metal. Here and there, though, was a shape that Boreas recognised, crafted from long-forgotten materials resistant to the planet's harsh environment – fan blades, gears and wheels, circuitry drawn with intricate crystal layers, ceramic bottles that glowed with their own light. Boreas glanced back to see Hephaestus bending over a particular object that looked like a mechanical spider with coils of wire sheath splayed from its rusted body.

'Don't touch anything,' warned Boreas as the Techmarine reached out a hand towards the device. He stopped instantly, his helmeted head turning towards the Interrogator-Chaplain.

'The Adeptus Mechanicus would be very pleased for these artefacts,' Hephaestus said over the inter-squad comm-link. 'They might prove useful for bargaining with them.'

'And you have no personal interest at all, of course,' joked Zaul from behind Hephaestus.

'I am a Space Marine first and foremost, a tech-priest only after that,' Hephaestus replied in a disgruntled voice.

'We are here to attend other matters, conduct yourselves with decorum,' Boreas chided them both. 'These relics belong to Hebris and his people, do not dishonour our Chapter and yourself by treating them with disrespect.'

'I understand, Brother-Chaplain, I apologise for my error in judgement,' replied Hephaestus, straightening up.

'I too am sorry for any misdeed,' added Zaul with a nod to Boreas.

'Then all is well,' Boreas told them. He noticed that the village elder was looking at the giant warriors, his face a picture of wide-eyed awe. He was, of course, oblivious to the exchange going on between the Space Marines, but Boreas realised that their body language and gestures betrayed their communication.

'*External address*. We were just admiring the sacred relics of your people,' Boreas remarked to Hebris, turning away from the rest of the squad.

'We found another in the jungles seven summers ago,' Hebris said proudly, his

face split with a grin as he pointed at a particular misshapen lump of debris.

'*External address*. Your diligence does you and your people credit,' Hephaestus said laying a massive gauntleted hand on Hebris's shoulder. The old man visibly sagged under the weight and the Techmarine quickly removed his hand and crossed his arms over his chest.

'I thank you for your kind words,' Hebris replied. 'But, enough of this! Bring out the bench for our lords.'

The elder clapped his hands and four muscular warriors ran to the back of the cave and emerged with a mighty seat hewn from a single tree trunk. Sweating and grunting under the weight, they manhandled it to the front of the platform outside the cave, where they set it down. Boreas and the others took their places and sat, the bench creaking under their combined weight but holding up under the strain.

'You may begin,' said Boreas with a nod towards Hebris. The chieftain scampered forward and called down to the villagers, who had gathered in a semi-circle below the shrine.

'My beloved sons and daughters,' Hebris cried out, his face beaming. 'Tonight is a night long-awaited! Our young braves shall fight in the trials before the eyes of the sky-warriors who serve the Emperor beyond the cloud. Those that are worthy shall go into the stars, there to fight for glory, and great honour and fortune shall they bring to our people. Let the willing ascendants come forth!'

Out of a cave at the foot of the cliff filed a group of twenty youths, in their early teenage years. They were naked except for splashes of purple and red war paint daubed in handprints over their chests and faces. In their hands, they each carried a skull or large bone, trophies from the hunts they had participated in.

They solemnly marched into the semi-circle formed by the villagers and stood in a line facing the Space Marines. Raising their prizes above their heads they shouted out in unison.

'Great lords of the Emperor,' they cried. 'We shall shed our blood today to prove our worth to you!'

The furthest to the left stepped forward, bowed to one knee and reverentially laid a viciously-fanged skull the size of his torso in front of him. Straightening, he looked up at the Space Marines.

'I have hunted for six seasons of the storm,' he called to them. 'This past year I slew a dagger-tooth with my spear, and I offer its head in tribute.'

When he stepped back, the next in the line took his place, crossing a pair of bones each as long as his arm and placing them next to the dagger-tooth skull.

‘I have hunted for seven seasons of the storm,’ he intoned solemnly. ‘My fellow hunters wounded this treejaw and I finished it with my knife.’

One by one, each of the aspirants stepped forward and proclaimed how they had come by their offerings, laying them on the ground beneath the platform. Boreas sat and nodded to each of them, but said nothing.

‘And now we shall show our honoured visitors the strength of our people,’ Hebris declared, clapping his hands again.

From one side of the caldera, a group of five warriors emerged carrying logs of different lengths and girths, and laid them out in front of the platform in ascending size. They then stepped back and the youths trotted forwards.

In the same order as before, each ran to the first log and grabbed it by the end. The warrior then stepped forward and placed his foot against the opposite end so that it would not slip and the youth hauled the log up and attempted to lever it above his head. As each stood there, arms quivering with the strain, the tribe gave out a great cheer and they gratefully dropped it back to the earth. All passed the first test with ease.

The trial was then repeated with the second tree trunk, and once more each of the aspirants was successful, though many wobbled dangerously and their legs threatened to buckle beneath the weight. At the third log, the first youth failed, throwing himself to one side as his straining arms faltered when it was at neck-height and the log tumbled from his grip. There was no cheer this time, but as he walked away from the group with his head hung with sadness into the arms of his family, they clapped him on the back reassuringly and ruffled his tousled hair affectionately.

Of the others, three more failed to lift the third log and were eliminated. It slipped from the grasp of one of them and he did not avoid its fall, catching a glancing blow to his leg which sent him sprawling. Shame-faced, he limped heavily from the contest, slapping away the hands of those who offered to support him.

After the fourth, two more had failed the task, but of those that remained, each managed to lift the fifth and final log, to resounding cheers from the gathered tribes people. As the fifteen remaining aspirants knelt in the earth and bowed their heads to the Space Marines, the logs were dragged away.

‘And now we shall show our honoured visitors the speed of our people,’ Hebris announced, once more clapping his hands together.

The crowd parted so that a path was formed from one edge of the village to the other, stretching out from the audience platform. At the far end, six warriors

stood holding bright red cloths, and six more fell into line at the foot of the platform. The aspirants lined up ready for the race to begin.

As one, the warriors dropped the rags and the boys set off at a sprint. A small, red-haired lad soon streaked into the lead, gaining several metres on his competitors after only a dozen strides. The crowd clapped and roared as the boys ran between them, nudging and elbowing each other as they jostled for position.

The first boy reached the far end quickly and snatched up one of the rags and spun to begin the return leg. A few seconds later, the others were also halfway and those with the fastest hands managed to grab the five remaining rags. They all hurtled back towards the Space Marines, and it was here that some began to tire, lagging behind the others as the group slowly stretched out. Just fifty metres from the end, the youth in the lead slowed rapidly, his gait becoming awkward as cramp gripped his legs. Teeth gritted, he hobbled on as the others ran past him, clawing at each other to get in front and claim the remaining qualification places.

One tripped and fell and was stepped on by the boy behind him, eliciting a laugh from the onlookers. Dusting himself down, he rose to his feet and gamely sprinted on, one arm nursing his bruised back. In the final dash for the finish, a tall, long-limbed youth surged ahead. He had obviously been saving his strength and in the last ten metres hurled himself forward and made a dive for one of the remaining cloths. The others followed in his wake and there was a desperate mad scramble of those who had not yet claimed a cloth, but eventually the twelve winners emerged.

The three others turned to leave, but the red-headed youth hobbled after them and grabbed one by the shoulder. There was a brief exchange, while the boy tried to force the other aspirant to take the cloth, as he could not carry on himself, but the other youth refused, pushing him away. Hebris's guards stepped in and separated the two as they squared up to fight, banishing them both back to the crowd with angry cuffs round the back of their heads. Once things had settled again, the eleven remaining competitors returned to their places in front of Boreas, the red cloths now tied around their waists. Hebris raised his arms into the air and his people's chattering and shouting fell silent.

'And now we shall show our honoured visitors how we can leap through the air like the lash-monkey,' he proclaimed, clapping his hands together once.

This time, twenty warriors emerged from one of the caves, each carrying a bundle of thin sharpened stakes roughly waist-high in length. They formed a line from Boreas's left to his right at one pace intervals and crouched down, the spears held upright in front of them.

The first youth jogged to the end of the line and then turned and bowed to the Space Marines. After receiving a nod from Boreas, he ran towards the line of crouching warriors. Leaping into the air, he stepped onto the back of the first and jumped forwards onto the back of the next, over the spear tips. From one to the next to the next, he leapt nimbly along the line, using the warriors as stepping-stones over the jagged spear tips. On the twelfth he faltered and threw himself to the side and landed heavily in the dirt.

The villagers' cheer echoed off the caldera's walls as he pushed himself to his feet and stood up with arms raised.

The next youth fell after only eight jumps, scoring a bloody cut into his thigh on the spear tips as his balance failed him and he tumbled forward. He stood there on one leg, blood streaming down the other, and acknowledged the adulation of the crowd. The next aspirant almost made it to the end, falling only after seventeen jumps, and the roar of the appreciative tribesmen was deafening.

The other aspirants each took their turn to greater or lesser degrees of success until all had completed the trial. The tenth warrior in the row then stood up and with the hafts of the thin spears he carried, he whipped the four boys who had failed to reach him back into the mass of villagers. Now only seven remained.

They ran into one of the caves, out of sight of Boreas, and emerged again a few minutes later. Each carried a cudgel tipped with the long tooth of a giant predator, and a shield made from woven hide pulled taut in a wooden frame.

'And now that we have proven the worth of our bodies, let us prove the worth of our spirit!' shouted Hebris, and the crowd formed back into a semicircle facing the Space Marines, leaving the aspirants in an area roughly twenty metres across. 'Only in battle shall we know this!'

The boys began to drum their clubs onto their shields, and other drums from around the caldera took up the frantic beat. For several minutes they drummed louder and louder until the boys were sweating with the effort, their limbs trembling from exertion. Hebris looked over at Boreas, who nodded.

'Let the trial begin!' Boreas roared over the cacophony, standing up and raising his right fist above his head.

The boys broke rank and formed into a circle facing each other, their weapons and shields held ready. The other drums slowed pace, a low beat sounding out every couple of seconds as the young ascendants eyed each other warily, casting glances up at the Space Marines high above them. Without a word, Boreas dropped his hand and the ritual battle began.

A blond-haired youth to Boreas's right charged forwards across the open space,

his weapon held high as he screamed a war cry. Brave, but rash, thought Boreas as he saw the boy quickly en-circled by the others and cut down. The fight quickly broke down into a scattered set of duels, except for two of the warriors, who stood back-to-back towards one side, keeping a wary eye on the progress of the fighting.

Boreas paid particular attention to them, watching as they worked together when the survivors of the individual contests emerged and sought fresh enemies…

Soon only the pair remained and one other, the rest of the aspirants having thrown down their weapons and surrendered, lying unconscious from receiving a beating, or sitting in the mud bleeding heavily and unable to continue. All around them, the tribes people hooted and chanted, the ever-present rumbling of the drums echoing around the amphitheatre.

'Quick, strong and clever,' Thumiel remarked over the comm, obviously referring to the two who had banded together.

'Yes, they show signs of promise,' agreed Boreas, smiling inside his helmet. 'The other is brave, see how he continues to fight on, even though he has seen them beat everyone else.' He had seen enough, there was no point in allowing the bloodletting to continue. He raised his hand above his head, and after a moment, the fighting stopped.

'*External address*.' Boreas turned to Hebris. 'Bring those three to the testing chamber,' he said before turning away and walking back into the cave, followed by the other Space Marines.

He walked through the relic-strewn shrine to an opening at the back of the cave covered by a heavy curtain of woven leaves. Brushing aside the flimsy barrier, he stepped through the archway into the cavern beyond. It was a small chamber, dominated by a stone slab in the centre, waist high and stained with the reddish-brown of old blood. It reminded him of an interrogation cell back at the Tower of Angels.

It struck him as ironic that this place of recruitment – of hope for the future – should bear such a resemblance to a place dedicated to eradicating the shame of the past.

He was perturbed by the thought, and wondered why it was that he had been troubled so much lately by the memories of his first interrogation. For several weeks now during prayer and in quieter moments, his thoughts had strayed back to that encounter with Astelan. It had been nearly fifteen years ago, and he had performed two other interrogations since, but still that first battle of wills with

one of the Fallen was etched into his mind.

He put it down to the isolation from his brethren. For several years he had been garrisoned here in the Piscina system with the others of his command, and in that time had not been in contact with any of his superiors or other members of the Inner Circle. The time preyed on his mind, and even his extended prayer sessions had done little to ease the doubts that had grown over recent months. Clenching his fists, Boreas exerted control over his wandering thoughts, bringing himself back to the matter in hand.

They waited for a few minutes until the curtain swayed and the three hopefuls entered, eyes wide with awe and fear. They saw the slab and stopped, darting nervous glances at the giant Space Marines who now surrounded them.

'Which of you shall be first?' asked Nestor, stepping towards the group.

They looked at each other and the eldest and tallest of them stepped forward. Boreas reckoned him to be little more than twelve or thirteen Terran years of age – perfect for the Dark Angels purposes. He was lean and wiry, with a thick shock of black hair that draped down over his deeply set eyes. He smiled wolfishly and took a pace towards the Apothecary.

'I am Varsin, I shall be the first,' the boy said proudly.

'Lie on the slab,' Nestor told him. The boy leapt onto the examining table and lay down, hands across his chest. Nestor loomed over him, a series of blades and needles extended from the narthecium built into his right forearm.

'Put your arms by your side, Varsin,' he said, placing a hand on the boy's forehead. The Apothecary's movements were deliberate and gentle, as fingers that could snap bones performed a cursory examination of the boy's body. 'This will cause you considerable pain,' he warned as he plunged the narthecium into the boy's stomach.

Varsin's shrieks rebounded shrilly off the walls as blades incised their way through skin and muscle and tendrils forced their way into his innards through the wound. Nestor placed a hand on the boy's chest and held him down as he scrabbled and yelled, his limbs waving wildly with agony. Blood bubbled up from the gash, spilling over the slab and splashing across Nestor's white armour in ruddy droplets.

The other two youths gave horrified gasps and began to back towards the curtained doorway, but their route was blocked by Thumiel, who carefully laid a hand on each of their heads and stopped them.

'You have seen worse when the hunt has gone wrong,' he said, and they nodded dumbly in answer, still aghast at the bloody scene in front of them.

As Varsin writhed, Nestor stood there calmly while the narthecium took what it needed. Automatic probes scored samples from the boy's stomach lining, extracted blood, bile and other fluids, measured blood pressure and pulse rate, injected anti-toxicants and cauterised wounds. The glowing amber light on the back of the device turned red and Nestor withdrew his fist. With a quick movement, a web of needles extended and stitched the wound shut in a matter of seconds. Varsin lay there covered with sweat, tears running down his face, his chest heaving under Nestor's palm.

'Do not move for a moment, or your wounds may reopen,' Nestor cautioned the youth, raising his hand and stepping away. The boy glanced at the others that had taken part in the trial by combat, who stood trembling with horrified stares. His gaze then passed to Boreas and the Chaplain gave a reassuring nod to the youth. Nestor fiddled with the displays of the narthecium, making readings of the samples he had taken. It was several minutes before a signal chimed and he approached Boreas.

'What are your findings?' Boreas asked.

'Ninety-eight per cent tissue match for suitability,' the Apothecary told him, consulting the green display on his arm. 'No endemic illnesses or inherited disorders. Acceptable tolerance levels of toxic influences, average life signals and pain response. The boy is perfect, physically speaking.'

'Good,' Boreas said, looking at the shivering boy. '*External address*. Come here, Varsin.'

Varsin swung his legs off the slab and lowered himself to the floor. Clutching his stomach, he padded across the stone and stood in front of Boreas, looking up nervously.

'Tell me of yourself,' Boreas asked him.

'I am the fifth son of Hebris, the chieftain, who was the second son of Geblin who took the cloak of thorns from Darsko in challenge,' the boy replied, his chest puffing up. 'My father's older brother was chosen to be a warrior for the Star Emperor.'

'Then the blood of your family is strong, you come from good stock,' said Boreas. 'What can you do to prove your loyalty to the Emperor beyond the cloud?'

'I don't understand, lord,' Varsin admitted.

'Would you kill your father if I commanded it?' Boreas asked.

'Kill my father?' the boy replied hesitantly. 'I would if you commanded it, though it would sadden me.'

‘And why would it sadden you?’ Boreas said, leaning down to look Varsin in the eye. The boy’s face was reflected in the red lenses of his helmet.

‘I would be saddened that my father had dishonoured our people by offending the Emperor beyond the cloud and his star warriors,’ the boy replied immediately. ‘I cannot imagine any other reason why you should wish him dead. He has served his people well.’

‘And are you, a mere boy, to be the judge of that?’ asked Boreas, the skull of his helm staring at Varsin.

‘No, lord, I would follow your command to slay him because you are a better judge than I,’ Varsin said with a slight shake of his head.

‘Good,’ said Boreas, straightening up. ‘Go outside and tell your father you shall be leaving with us tonight,’

‘I am?’ The boy’s eyes shone with pride and a grin split his face. He took a few hurried steps towards the door and then stopped and doubled up in pain.

‘I said rest those wounds!’ Nestor barked.

‘I am sorry, my lord,’ Varsin said through a grimace, before walking more slowly through the curtain.

Boreas turned to the two remaining aspirants and gestured towards the slab. They exchanged worried glances and then one of them took a faltering step forward.

‘I… I am…’ the lad was visibly shaking, staring at the fresh blood on the examination table. ‘No! I can’t do it!’

He fell to his knees weeping and buried his face in his hands. Boreas walked over and crouched beside him, the servos in his armour whining loudly as he did so. The boy looked up at him, tears streaming down his face, and shook his head.

‘I am sorry,’ he wailed. ‘I have dishonoured you, and shamed my family, but I cannot do it.’

‘What is your name?’ Boreas’s metal-edged voice echoed harshly around the chamber.

‘Sanis, my lord,’ the boy replied.

‘It takes a brave man to know his limits, Sanis,’ Boreas said. ‘But a Space Marine of the Emperor must have no limits. You understand this?’

‘I do,’ said Sanis.

‘Then follow me,’ Boreas told the youth. He strode to the opposite side of the chamber and, delving his hand into well-concealed crack in the stone, activated a hidden switch. A section of the wall ground backwards out of sight, leaving a dark opening slightly taller than the Chaplain. Boreas motioned for Sanis to

enter and the boy disappeared into the shadows, the Space Marine following him. He urged the boy further forward a few steps and transmitted a coded signal over his suit's comm unit. A dull red light flickered into life overhead.

They were in a chamber that stretched off into the darkness. The floor was littered with old bones, knee-deep in places. Eyeless skulls glowed ruddily in the gloom, staring at the aspirant.

'If you return to your family having failed this test, it will bring them dishonour,' Boreas told the boy, and the youth nodded in agreement. 'They would lose all status, most likely they would starve to death within the turning of a season. You will be beaten, bullied, scorned by your people.'

'It is true,' Sanis replied softly. 'I will take the test, I am sorry for being a coward.'

'It is too late to change your mind, you cannot refuse and then agree,' Boreas said. 'Your life, for what short time it will continue, will be full of misery and pain, and your return will doom your family. Though you have fallen at this hurdle, you were chosen to reach this far, and for that I give you credit and due honour. I will spare you and your family the wretchedness your refusal might incur.'

Boreas reached out and his gauntleted hand gripped the boy's neck. Even as the youth opened his mouth to speak, the Chaplain twisted his wrist, easily snapping Sanis's spine. Delicately, Boreas picked up the dead boy's limp form and carried him to the pile of bones and reverently laid him upon the top. He stepped back and bowed his head.

'May your soul be guarded from corruption and return again to serve the Emperor in a new life,' he intoned, kneeling and laying a hand upon the boy's chest. 'We will tell your people the truth – that you died during your trial and faced death bravely. They will be spared your shame.'

He turned on his heel and walked from the secret chamber, sending the signal to switch off the light as he did so. Stepping outside, he pressed the hidden switch again and the door ground back into place leaving no sign of the join.

The Interrogator-Chaplain turned to the last remaining youth and pointed at the slab. The aspirant had seen nothing that had happened in the other chamber, and his eyes showed more confidence than before.

'Do you submit yourself to the judgement of the Dark Angels?' he asked. The boy smiled and nodded.

Varsin gazed with wonder out of the armoured window of the Thunderhawk at

the looming shape of the Dark Angels starship hanging in orbit over Piscina V. Sharp-prowed and sleek, dominated by its massive engines, the *Blade of Caliban* looked like a space-borne predator. It was not so far from the truth; one of the fastest ships in the sector, the rapid strike vessel was built for extended patrols across dozens of explored and uncharted star systems, to respond with speed to any situation, and yet carried enough firepower to destroy anything of similar size.

Though considered small for a warp-capable vessel, it was nearly half a kilometre in length and could in theory carry half a company of Space Marines, although its primary function was to act as the Chapter's eyes and ears, the duty of transportation and war falling to the larger strike cruisers and immense battle barges.

Fully a third of the starship's length was taken up by its powerful plasma engines and the reactors to drive them, almost the entirety of the rest of the structure was pinpricked with gun emplacements, scanning areas and launch bays. At the fore, the heavily armoured prow was pierced by the dark holes of its torpedo tubes. As they neared, the stars seemed to shimmer and there was a brief scattering of blue and purple light as they passed through the ship's void shields.

The other aspirant, Beyus, was strapped into one of the gunship's seats, heavily sedated. As he had been taken up into orbit above Piscina V, the shock had proven too much for him and he had begun sobbing and wailing, tearing at his eyes in disbelief.

It was not unusual for an aspirant from a feral world to suffer such catastrophic culture shock and Nestor had quietened him with a narcolepsia. If the boy did not recover his senses soon, he would be useless as a recruit and the tech-priests would take him, scrub his mind of the traumas and turn him into a servitor so that he might still be of service to the Chapter.

The Thunderhawk passed into the shadow of the ship and powered its way to the landing bay. As darkness fell outside, Varsin turned away, eyes wide with excitement. The interior of the Thunderhawk was a mix of chapel and control deck, its arched alcoves filled with flickering screens and digital runepads, while an ornately embroidered banner covered the ceiling.

The Space Marines had discarded their helmets, and their backpacks were locked into stowage positions to recharge from the gunship's engines while their armour functioned on its own internal power source. Except for Hephaestus, who was in the cockpit piloting, they were all sitting with their heads bowed in prayer, each silently mouthing their own chosen catechisms to the Emperor and

their primarch, Lion El'Jonson. Aware of the subdued mood, the boy quelled his excitement and seated himself at the rear end of the gunship, away from the intimidating presence of the Space Marines.

Soon light glared through the ports as the Thunderhawk docked, accompanied by the clang of clamps sealing to the hull and bringing the craft safely inside the *Blade of Caliban*. Roused from their reverie, the Space Marines stood, and each backed onto his armour's power pack. With a hiss of hydraulics and the clank of locking mechanisms, automatic arms implanted the backpacks into their armour once more. They reached beneath the bench and picked up their helmets, uniformly carrying them under their left arm. As the assault ramp crashed down onto the decking, they filed out slowly into the docking bay. Tech-priests and half-machine servitors moved to and fro, checking the Thunderhawk, giving praise to the Machine-God for its safe return and sprinkling it with holy oils from heavy censers.

The Space Marines strode through the gathering crowd, Nestor carrying Beyus under his free arm, Varsin hurrying to keep up with his giant escort.

'Are not all of the star warriors like yourselves?' he asked. The boy's gaze was moving constantly, taking in every detail of the strange environment, alternating between surprise and dread. He pointed at the Chapter serfs who busied themselves around the flight bay – normal humans who performed the hundreds of day-to-day functions of the Chapter on behalf of their Space Marine masters.

'There are very few of us,' Nestor replied as a group of robed functionaries scurried towards him. He passed the comatose Beyus to them and they carried him away. 'It is said that the Imperium of the Emperor holds more worlds than it does Space Marines. You have passed only the first tests, there are many more to come. Some do not survive, but those who fail and live to tell of it will serve the Chapter in other ways, as do these serfs.'

'More tests?' asked Varsin. 'When do they take place? How long before I can fight for the Emperor as a Space Marine?'

'Such impatience!' laughed Zaul. 'If, and it is only if, you become a Space Marine it takes years of training and surgery. I myself was twelve summers old when I was chosen, but I was eighteen before I received my black carapace.'

'What is that? Your armour?' asked Varsin.

'Yes and no,' said Nestor. 'Much of the years to come will be spent teaching you of the stars and worlds beyond the cloud, so that you might understand truly what is to become of you. My brethren in the apothecarion will change your body, making it grow strong like ours. You will be given new lungs to breathe

poison, and a second heart so that your blood might continue to flow in the heat of battle despite grievous wounds. We will give you the precious gene-seed of the Lion, and his greatness will flow through your veins and be bound into your bones. You will feel no pain, you shall have the strength of ten men, you will see in the dark as clearly as day and you will hear an assassin's breath over the thunder of a storm. Lastly, you shall have the black carapace that melds your body to your armour so that you can wear it as you might a second skin.'

The boy was dumbstruck, incapable of even conceiving of the advanced gene-therapy and implantation process he would undergo. For him, such things were magical, the powers of the Emperor beyond the cloud, not for him to judge or understand.

'Not only shall your body be crafted into a living weapon of the Emperor's will,' added Boreas. 'Your mind must be trained also. You shall learn the Catechisms of Hate, the battle-prayers of the Chapter, the hymnals to the Lion. You must learn how to use the new organs that will grow inside your body, and control the rage you must feel when confronted with the alien, the traitor and the heretic. As your muscles grow, so shall your mental fortitude, so that like us you shall never know fear again, nor doubt nor compassion and mercy, for they are weaknesses a vile enemy will exploit.'

As he spoke the words, Boreas felt them ring hollow in his own heart. The legacy of Astelan's words still gnawed at him even now. Boreas knew himself guilty of all those things which he trained others to suppress – fear of himself and his own power, doubts of his own loyalty and motives, compassion and mercy for those his Chapter had sworn to destroy for ten thousand years. Like an open wound, his traitorous thoughts festered in his mind.

'Truly you are great. How blessed are we to have such lords!' gasped Varsin.

The Space Marines exchanged silent looks, for each knew of the pain and mental torture they had endured to become such superhumans. None of them could truly remember where they came from, or their family and friends. They were Space Marines of the Dark Angels Chapter; nothing less, nothing more. They lived only to serve the Emperor, honour their battle-brothers and protect mankind. Though they were the ultimate defenders of humanity, they themselves would never know true humanity again.

'Enough questions,' barked Boreas, annoyed at his own harmful introspection, causing Varsin to flinch and almost stumble. He glanced at the others but their faces betrayed no evidence that they sensed something was amiss. 'There will be questions enough when the Tower of Angels arrives in Piscina.'

It took several days for the *Blade of Caliban* to return to Piscina IV. Unlike the feral fifth world, Piscina IV had maintained a veneer of civilisation through the Age of Strife, and when the Dark Angels had reclaimed the world during the Great Crusade, they had been welcomed with open arms by the humans living there. In many ways, Piscina was perfect for the Dark Angels' purposes. The barbaric warriors of the fifth planet provided excellent recruits – natural and hardy warriors that could only be found on such deathworlds, or in the savage depths of a hive-world. But the semi-cultured fourth world gave them a place for their outpost, a haven they could dwell in without interfering with the development of the tribesmen of Piscina V.

It was towards the capital, Kadillus Harbour, that the Thunderhawk gunship now descended. As the aircraft entered the upper atmosphere, Hephaestus called to Boreas to join him in the cockpit.

Through the armoured windshield, the Chaplain saw the massive oceans of the world and the thousands of scattered volcanic islands that ringed the planet in thousand kilometre-long chains. Almost all were still active and uninhabitable. The largest island, Kadillus itself, rose amongst those nearby, thousands of kilometres high and formed from five huge volcanoes. Long dormant, the same geo-thermal activity that had created such a world now provided the inhabitants with much of their power, and Boreas could see the thermal venting from the power stations hanging as a thick haze over the island, obscuring the ground below the tips of the volcanoes.

'Sergeant Damas at our keep has re-directed an emergency comms signal from Colonel Brade,' Hephaestus told the Interrogator-Chaplain. Brade was the commander of the Imperial Guard forces stationed on Piscina for the last few years, ever since an ork invasion had almost conquered the world. Pockets of orks still held out in the wilderness areas, and despite regular cleanse and burn operations to destroy the spores left by the greenskin aliens, never would Piscina be free from the threat of their wild attacks.

'Thunderhawk communication,' Boreas commanded the comms pick-up in his armour, which was then boosted by the gunship's longer ranged array. 'This is Interrogator-Chaplain Boreas, how may we be of assistance, colonel?'

'Lord Boreas, there is a serious ork attack under way at Vartoth,' Brade's crackling voice told him. Vartoth was one of the old mine heads, disused now, but for a warren of buildings and underground tunnels. Boreas realised immediately that if the orks were allowed to establish themselves there, it would take nothing short of a full-scale assault to drive them out.

‘Please be more specific, colonel,’ Boreas said, shaking his head slightly with unconscious disapproval.

‘We estimate that nearly five hundred orks have broken through the perimeter walls of the complex, and have holed up in the mine buildings,’ Brade explained. ‘I have three infantry platoons already at the battle zone, and three armoured fist platoons en route, but the greenskins will be well and truly dug in by the time they arrive. The orks seem to be very well armed somehow. Please assist.’

Brade’s men were currently outnumbered, Boreas calculated quickly, and despite the armoured personnel carriers and light support tanks of the armoured fist platoon, they would find it hard to establish any foothold with which to launch a concerted effort on the mine head.

‘Of course, Colonel Brade,’ said Boreas. He glanced at Hephaestus, who had been listening in on the exchange. The Techmarine manipulated the controls of one of the displays and brought up a tactical schematic.

‘We will be with you inside ten minutes, colonel,’ Hephaestus told the Imperial Guard commander, checking the digital map.

‘Be ready to push forward when we arrive,’ Boreas warned.

‘I am a kilometre south of the mine head, I await your arrival,’ Brade said. ‘We shall discuss how best you can assist.’

‘You misunderstand me, colonel,’ replied Boreas. ‘We will commence an immediate assault, please have your troops prepared to exploit any breakthrough.’

‘Oh, I…’ Brade stammered. ‘Of course, we shall start our advance immediately and will be prepared to provide additional troops on your arrival.’

‘Thank you, Colonel Brade,’ Boreas replied before he cut the comm-link and looked at Hephaestus. ‘Engage machine-spirit to take us in. Open the armoury and distribute jump packs.’

‘Understood,’ replied the Techmarine with a nod. His large hands danced quickly over the controls of the gunship before he stood up and made his way to the armoured section at the back of the Thunderhawk. Controlled by its own artificial mind, the gunship steered its way down through the clouds towards Vartoth.

The young aspirants huddled in the corner watching the Space Marines preparing for battle, plugging each other into their jump packs and tightening the grip-harnesses. The jump packs were even bulkier than a normal power plant backpack, most of their mass taken up with two flared engines designed to allow the wearer to bound through the air at high speed. They fixed their helmets and

drew bolters from the weapons rack, while Boreas opened his small reliquary and brought forth his power sword.

He tested the activation stud and the long blade was enveloped by a shimmering blue haze of energy, capable of shattering armourplas and slicing though bone. Satisfied that all was in working order, he sheathed the sword and took out his rosarius, the symbol of his position. The ornate badge was wrought in the shape of a square set with a glinting ruby which doubled as projector for the compact force field generator contained within. Taking the winged-skull key from the reliquary, he fitted it to the rosarius and it hummed into life.

'Approaching drop zone,' warned Hephaestus from the cockpit and Boreas nodded to him.

'Check seals, clear for debarking,' the Interrogator-Chaplain told the squad and they assembled in single file in the belly of the gunship, facing towards the forward assault ramp. He walked over to Varsin and Sanis, who were dwarfed by the warriors around them, sitting silently in bewilderment near to the cockpit.

'Strap yourselves in tightly, we would rather you were not harmed before we get you to the keep,' he told them, pointing at the safety harnesses hanging from the inside of the hull. 'The Thunderhawk will take you to safety once we are gone. Do not attempt to rise from this position even when you have landed. The Thunderhawk may be recalled at any moment and it could prove unfortunate if you were not secure at that time.'

Both the aspirants nodded meekly. They had soon learned of the Dark Angels' discipline aboard the *Blade of Caliban*, and knew that they had to obey every order to the letter.

'Lowering ramp,' Hephaestus said, activating the gunship's hydraulics when he saw that the boys were safely secured in the crash harnesses.

'What will become of us?' asked Varsin shrilly. 'Can we not come with you when you land?'

'Land?' laughed Zaul. 'That would take too long. You'll not be following us anywhere, just stay in the Thunderhawk and you'll be safe.'

The roar of the engines grew to deafening proportions as the ramp opened and revealed the grey-blue of the Piscinan sky. Wind whipped into the gunship's interior and the boys grabbed the straps tightly as it blew their hair and lashed at their faces. The ground could be seen screaming past some hundred metres below, and Boreas looked at the others from the front of the column.

'Weapons check complete?' he asked, and they responded in unison. Breaking into a run, Boreas threw himself down the ramp. 'For the Emperor! Glory to the

Lion!'

The Interrogator-Chaplain hurled himself off the end of the assault ramp and into the sky, the others quickly following. Above them the Thunderhawk banked sharply away from the conflict zone, its semi-sentient machine-spirit guiding it to a safe landing zone to await recall by Hephaestus.

A burst of fire from his jump pack slowed Boreas's decent for a couple of seconds and his lighting-fast mind assessed the scene below. The Vartoth facility was a group of five buildings clustered around the mine head itself. A high curtain wall had been breached to the north, the rubble strewn across the rockcrete apron within.

Muzzle flare and las-bolts flickered in the darkening twilight as the orks within the buildings exchanged fire with the Guardsmen desperately trying to force their way through the gate and the gap in the wall. But the humans were pinned down, there was little cover for them to shelter behind once they got inside the wall and the ground was dotted with dead and wounded.

Inside the compound, the buildings were mostly three and four-storey rectangles of grey ferrocrete, pitted by erosion and cracked in many places from subsidence in the over-mined ground beneath them. There were orks at every glassless window, firing wildly at the Imperial Guard, spraying the courtyard with bullets and spent shell casings. The greatest concentration of fire seemed to be coming from a ten-storey tower to Boreas's left.

'Nestor, Zaul, with me to the left!' he commanded. 'Hephaestus, Thumiel, take the pump house to the right.'

The ground rushed up to meet the squad and they fired their jump packs just before landing. Even with the retro-thrust they all landed heavily, their boots cracking the rockcrete ground with the impact.

Boreas drew his sword and thumbed the power blade into life whilst drawing his bolt pistol from his belt with his left hand. They had landed in the middle of the firefight and bullets and las-fire whistled around their heads as the squad split and headed off towards their objectives at a pounding run.

A bullet zinged off Boreas's left shoulder plate and he turned slightly and returned fire at the fanged face of the ork who had shot him. Three bolts flared across the gap in a single burst of fire, and the wall of the building exploded into dust and shrapnel as their explosive tips detonated a moment after impact.

The ork was flung back with shards of ferrocrete in its face, its gun tumbling from dead fingers.

As Zaul and Nestor gave him covering fire, Boreas ran towards the door to the

tower. More bullets zipped harmlessly off his armour as he sprinted forward, and his bolt pistol barked continuously with his return fire.

The whole front of the tower was now pock-marked with bolt craters, and several of the brutish aliens hung dead out of the windows. Suddenly a rocket smoked across the courtyard from one of the other buildings and a tremendous explosion shook the ground close by. Zaul was hurled from his feet by the detonation and clattered loudly to the ground. Nestor spun and hurled a grenade across the open space through one of the windows, his aim rewarded with a billow of fire and smoke from the occupied building, and a scattering of dark blood and green flesh showered out of the opening.

Zaul pushed himself to his feet, firing his bolter one-handed at the tower's windows, his right shoulder pad ripped away. The twisted actuators sparked and whirred as they malfunctioned, and thick blood oozed from a crack in Zaul's upper arm. Nestor glanced at the injury but Zaul waved him away.

'Heal me later, Apothecary,' the battle-brother insisted, gripping his bolter in both hands and starting forward again.

'A scratch like that doesn't need my attention,' Nestor replied with a deep laugh.

The door to the tower was made of sturdy wood, but was no barrier for the power-armoured Boreas. A single kick from his booted foot splintered it in half and tore the hinges out, sending the door crashing onto the orks inside. The Interrogator-Chaplain's power sword blazed as he swung it left and right, lopping off heads and limbs with easy blows. The orks mobbed him, battered at his armour with the butts of their stolen guns, but were thrown back as his rosarius burst into life, blinding them with its white glare.

Boreas blew the head off another ork with a close range shot from his bolt pistol, while behind him Zaul and Nestor battered their way through the green-skinned aliens with their fists, smashing bones and tearing at flesh with their inhumanly strong hands. The orks were no weaklings, their slab-like muscles more than capable of viciously wounding a normal man, their tusks and claws capable of tearing flesh from the bone. But they were as children when matched against the armoured might of the Dark Angels.

The Space Marines cleared the ground floor quickly, stepping over the piled bodies of the dead aliens to blast at those behind. Zaul cleared the stairwell with a few well-placed bolter salvoes, and their hold was secured for the moment.

The other two Space Marines looked at Boreas and he nodded at Zaul. Ramming a fresh magazine into his bolter, the battle-brother started up the stairs.

Almost instantly, volleys of fire rained down on him, scoring deep grooves into his armour and sending flecks of paint swirling in a cloud around him. Settling to one knee, he returned fire, the bodies of two orks plummeting down from the landing above to land at Boreas's feet. One shook its head dizzily before the blazing tip of Boreas's sword caved in its skull.

With covering fire from Zaul, Boreas and Nestor stormed up the steps, their bolt pistols roaring in the close confines of the stairwell. The orks fell back before the assault, retreating into the two rooms either side of the landing, and Boreas paused to pull a fragmentation grenade from his belt. Nestor followed suit, and they tossed them through the doorways simultaneously.

Even as the grenades detonated, the Space Marines rushed the landing, sprinting through the smoke and shrapnel, the flashes of their guns like blossoms of fire in the dusty haze. Reeling and coughing, the orks were stunned by the attack, as shots from Boreas's bolt pistol punched a hole through the skull of one and ripped through the thigh of another. Recovering, the green-skinned aliens hurled themselves at the Chaplain, smashing at him with their guns and trying to prise an opening in his armour with their knives. Four clung on to his armour, trying to drag him down.

The first was hurled back as a bolt exploded in its stomach, and the second stumbled away clutching its face as Boreas head-butted it squarely between the eyes. A short kick stove in the chest of the third, and the fourth was quickly despatched by a blow from Boreas's sword, which ripped its jaw clean off and threw the alien across the room. There were eight more orks in the room, but as they prepared to charge, Zaul appeared at Boreas's side and tossed a grenade forward. Two were shredded instantly in the blast, the others hurled to the ground. With bolter and pistol, the two Space Marines quickly despatched the survivors.

Floor by floor, the Space Marines waded bloodily through the orks. Boreas's armour was cracked and dented in dozens of places by the time they had cleared the top floor, and underneath it his thick blood had congealed over cuts and gashes to his arms and legs. After a few gory minutes, not a single ork was left alive within the tower.

Boreas glanced out of one of the windows to see the Imperial Guard swarming over the courtyard, firing up at the windows of the other buildings now that the deadly crossfire had been stopped.

'Progress report,' Boreas signalled the other two Space Marines who had attacked to the right on landing.

‘Pump house clear, Imperial Guard have secured mine head, little resistance remaining,’ Thumiel told him.

‘Understood, withdraw to the courtyard and regroup,’ Boreas transmitted to the squad.

Dust and smoke clogged the air inside the compound, but through his auto-senses Boreas could see Colonel Brade clearly, directing the extermination operation from just inside the gateway.

The Imperial commander looked up as the giant figures loomed out of the murk, his expression guarded. The Space Marines’ armour was pitted and scarred, the paint scraped away in places, dents and cracks all over their bodies. One of Boreas’s eye-lenses had been cracked by a point-blank shot from an autogun, and the colonel could see the mechanical probes from the helmet punched into the flesh around his eye. Breaking his stare, he offered a hand to Boreas.

‘Many thanks for your help, Lord Boreas,’ Brade said. The Interrogator-Chaplain’s fist dwarfed the colonel’s hand as he shook it.

‘Your gratitude is welcome, but the death of the Emperor’s enemies is reward enough,’ Boreas replied, staring over the colonel’s shoulder.

‘Of course, of course it is,’ agreed Brade, dropping his hand to his side and glancing backwards at the telltale jets of the approaching Thunderhawk closing in. He turned his gaze to the Techmarine who was guiding the craft back to its masters.

‘I am confident that you and your men are capable of dealing with the current situation,’ Boreas stated, looking at Brade once more.

‘Yes, there’s relatively few orks left now. We just need to burn the bodies to prevent them shedding more spores,’ the colonel agreed. ‘However, these attacks are becoming more frequent and more organised. Might I ask again when your esteemed Chapter will be able to spare more battle-brothers to aid us in our efforts?’

‘When the Tower of Angels returns, Master Azrael will be notified of the situation here and will make his decision.’ Boreas replied firmly. Though always respectful and well meaning, Brade’s frequent requests for more Dark Angels to be stationed on Piscina were beginning to wear Boreas’s patience. He had explained numerous times that Space Marines were not intended to garrison worlds en masse, and were it not for the recruiting world of Piscina V, the Imperial Guard would have been left to defend the planet on their own without even the aid of Boreas and his squad.

‘I understand. I’ll contact the Departmento Munitorum again with a request for more troops,’ the colonel replied, looking away with disappointment.

‘Good, then I will bid you goodbye.’ Boreas turned and signalled for the others to leave as the roar of the approaching Thunderhawk’s jets drowned out the crackle of flames and sporadic gunfire.

# THE TALE OF ASTELAN

## PART TWO

Astelan could not guess how long he had been chained to the slab in the cell. Boreas had visited him eleven times, that much he knew. Sometimes the psyker had been with him, at other times he had been alone.

His body was scarred with burns and cuts from the Interrogator-Chaplain's attentions. He had cut away parts of Astelan's black carapace to probe and bleed the exposed flesh beneath.

Hunger gnawed at Astelan, his throat was parched, his lips cracked, his mind dulled and fatigued. But he would not let himself sleep. He would show no weakness. In the moments of respite he was granted, he would fall into a meditative trance, allowing the pain to wash away from his body, leaving his mind clear. He was determined not to submit to them, for to do so would be the greatest betrayal of all.

Every ideal and principle Astelan believed in told him this was the true way, that it was his captors who were in the wrong. It was they who were ignorant and deluded, shackled by those who were scared of their power. It mattered not whether Astelan died or lived, he would stay true to the cause for which he had been created.

On his twelfth visit, the Interrogator-Chaplain was alone once more. He brought with him a goblet of water, which Astelan thirstily gulped down, ignoring the chilling spills across his face and throat. Next, he took the bread Boreas proffered him in torn chunks, mustering the strength to chew and swallow, though pain flared in the back of his dehydrated throat. When he finished, Boreas took a phial from inside his robe and sprinkled liquid on Astelan's wounds. The stinging wracked his body at first, but the pain subsided after several minutes.

‘We must let the body recover, for it is weaker than the soul,’ Boreas said, standing next to Astelan with his arms crossed. ‘While the impure soul endures, the body must also endure.’

‘Then you must preserve my physical shell for eternity,’ replied Astelan. ‘I will never submit to your misguided logic, your errant ways.’

‘Tell me of Tharsis,’ Boreas asked, ignoring Astelan’s defiance.

‘What of it?’ Astelan replied with a shrug.

‘I would know how a world could be so subverted from the service of the Emperor,’ Boreas told him, walking to the shelves and picking up one of the blades that lay there.

‘I did not subvert Tharsis, it was I who saved it,’ protested Astelan.

‘I do not believe you,’ Boreas snorted, toying with the knife. ‘You brought damnation upon that world.’

‘No, that is not true, not true at all,’ Astelan denied, shaking his head. ‘I saved Tharsis from itself.’

‘Tell me how such a feat could be accomplished,’ Boreas said as he returned the knife to its place and walked to the interrogation slab, standing so that Astelan could only see his face.

‘I arrived on Tharsis eighty years ago,’ Astelan began. ‘It was a beautiful world of high mountains and grassy plains, not unlike dozens of other worlds that I have seen in my long life. But that beauty hid a dark canker. The world was in turmoil, gripped by a vicious civil war.’

‘A war that you began!’ Boreas spat, crashing a fist down onto the stone table next to Astelan’s head.

‘No, I swear by the Emperor that it was not so!’ Astelan argued, turning his head as far as possible to look up at his interrogator. ‘We came for supplies. Tharsis is on the edge of wilderness space, self-sufficient and far from the claws of those who have turned the Imperium into a mockery of the Emperor’s dream.’

‘You said “we”. Who else was with you?’ Boreas’s voice dripped with suspicion.

‘I travelled for a century and a half before I came upon Tharsis and its woes,’ explained Astelan. ‘In that time, fate saw fit for my journey to cross with that of two others like myself. But we argued at Tharsis. They would not join me in my mission to deliver the planet from the tyrants who attempted to usurp the Emperor’s rule.’

‘They abandoned you there? Disloyalty even amongst your own kind, is there nothing so base?’ Boreas scoffed.

‘I let them go with goodwill,’ Astelan replied with a slight shake of his head. ‘Though they did not care to share the task I had set myself, I knew I had found a purpose again, a chance to do that for which I was created.’

‘Which was?’ Boreas asked.

‘To fight for the Emperor, of course!’ Astelan’s hands sub-consciously balled into fists and the chains creaked under the flexing of his muscles. ‘The others left, but I remained on Tharsis. At first it was impossible to tell friend from foe, but I soon learned to mark them apart. Secessionism, heresy, rebellion, call it what you will, had taken hold. They had divided the population with grand, empty speeches of fraternity and equality. They defied the Imperial commander, and subverted members of his military. The war had waged for a year before I arrived.’

‘A strange coincidence that such strife should herald your arrival.’ Boreas made no attempt to hide his disbelief. His accusation was clear – Astelan had started the war.

‘Not coincidence, fortuitous destiny,’ the prisoner argued. ‘Whatever it is that controls our fates had seen fit to bring me to Tharsis in its time of need. How could I not intervene? During the Great Crusade, eighty worlds fell to my Chapter for resisting the wisdom and rule of the Emperor. Eighty worlds! And here was another chance to prove myself.’

‘What did you think you could do, a lone Space Marine in a worldwide conflict?’ Boreas demanded, straightening again and pacing away from the slab. He glanced back at Astelan as he spoke. ‘Such arrogance is unbecoming of a Space Marine.’

‘No, not arrogance, it was a sense of purpose,’ Astelan replied, his gaze following the pacing Chaplain. ‘My heart told me that I would make a difference, and I did.’

‘And how did you manage such a thing?’ Boreas said, his back to Astelan so that his low voice echoed off the cell walls.

‘At first I simply fought the rebels where I found them, but they were ill-trained and poorly equipped,’ Astelan told him. ‘It was more a just execution than a battle. But soon, I joined with others fighting for the Emperor. They welcomed me with cheers and cries of joy when I fought by their side at Kaltan Town, breaking through the enemy with bolter and fist.’

‘Were they not surprised?’ Boreas asked, turning to stare at his prisoner, arms crossed over his chest. ‘Were their suspicions not aroused by a lone Space Marine?’

‘They saw me for what I am, a warrior of the Emperor,’ Astelan explained patiently. ‘They took great heart from my presence. They were bolstered to know that I fought on their side, confirming the justice of their cause.’

‘So you set yourself up as a symbol to be worshipped? You saw fit to replace the Emperor in their hearts and minds.’ Disgust was written over Boreas’s face as he considered this grievous sin.

‘Must you twist everything I say?’ growled Astelan, looking away with contempt. ‘Have your own endeavours become so hollow that you now seek to belittle the achievements of those who still fight for the true cause?’

‘Your cause was blatant megalomania!’ snapped Boreas, striding forward. ‘You sought nothing more than to achieve your own ambition. A former Chapter commander, stripped of everything, you lusted after that power again!’

‘Power? I will tell you of power,’ Astelan said in a terse whisper. ‘My word is the word of the Emperor himself. My sword is his sword. Every battle I have fought has been in his name. He had a vision – to drive back the aliens and the mutants, to unite mankind under his rule and guidance. He strove for humanity, to take back the stars that had once been ours, a vision we had thrown away for petty-minded goals and the worship of technology. From the ashes of the Age of Strife, the Emperor arose to lead us back into the galaxy, to conquer the stars and to safeguard our future. He alone saw this, and it was the Emperor who created us to fulfil his vision. It was we, the Space Marines, who were to be the instrument of creation. It was our duty, our whole purpose, to forge the Emperor’s dream into a reality.’

‘And yet, at the end, you turned on him and threatened everything you had shed blood to build.’ Boreas’s voice was filled with sadness rather than anger.

‘The first betrayal was not ours!’ protested Astelan.

‘And Tharsis?’ Boreas stooped low and spoke quietly into Astelan’s ear. ‘What has this to do with your enslavement of a world? The Great Crusade was ten millennia ago.’

‘And in that statement, you confirm your ignorance,’ Astelan replied, staring into the Chaplain’s eyes. ‘The Great Crusade was not intended to be an event; it is a state of mind. The crusade never finishes, it is never complete while there is an alien alive to threaten our worlds, and while discord lingers in the heart of the Imperium.’

‘And so you continued the fight on Tharsis?’ Boreas’s voice was now little more than a whisper from the darkness as he stepped back out of Astelan’s sight.

‘Yes, and as I did so, I rallied support around me,’ Astelan exclaimed proudly.

‘In time, I had an audience with Imperial Commander Dax himself. He had heard of the victories I had won in the Emperor’s name, and he was overjoyed.’

‘And so your ego was flattered and the sin of pride grew in you.’ Boreas’s haunting whisper seemed to come from every direction, resonating off the walls like a crowd of accusers.

‘I never sought aggrandisement, but I admit I was glad of the praise,’ Astelan said, moving his head from side to side, trying to catch a glimpse of Boreas. ‘You cannot know what it is like to be abandoned, scorned by those who were once allies. I had been lost, I was searching for a way to regain my place, and on Tharsis I found it.’

‘But there is still a long way from renowned warrior to despot.’

‘Your insults deserve only contempt, they only prove your lack of character and woeful ignorance,’ Astelan spat, tired of the Chaplain’s attempts to disorientate and confuse him. ‘Though we had won some battles, there was still much to be done if we were to prevail over the rebels. Though I was the greatest warrior on Tharsis, even I could not achieve victory by myself.’

‘How modest of you, to accept such limitations.’

‘If you listen, instead of poorly attempting to mock me at every instant, then you might gain understanding,’ Astelan said slowly, resting his head back against the slab and staring at the ceiling. He cast his mind back to the first days he had spent on Tharsis. ‘On my own I could not win the war purely by martial effort. But my skills, my knowledge, could still save Tharsis from the rene-gades. I handed my weapons over to the Imperial commander’s tech-priests so that they might study them and turn the munitions factories over to production of superior arms. I had the hundred best soldiers sent to me at the capital. There I trained them in everything I knew. For half a year, I pushed and pushed them. Many did not survive, and at first there were doubts. The Imperial commander had full faith in me, but his aides expressed concerns over my methods. Their self-importance was galling – who were they, bureaucrats and priests, to argue with a Chapter commander of the Dark Angels on military matters? I ignored them, and the protests were silenced when I led my elite company into battle for the first time. They were not Space Marines – five of my battle-brothers could have achieved what those sixty men did – but they were better equipped and more deadly than anything the rebels had faced before. We stormed one of the strongholds in the Sezenuan Mountains. For five hundred and seventeen days the Emperor’s loyal forces had besieged the fortress; we took it in a single night.’

‘Yes, I remember facing your so-called sacred bands when we retook Tharsis.

Fanatical, courageous, they were worthy opponents.'

'Worthy indeed!' agreed Astelan. 'Fifty-one of the first sacred band survived the assault, and I sent them out to the other regiments to each train a hundred men, and those that survived to train a hundred more. As the number of sacred bands grew, the demand for bolters, ammunition, carapace armour, grenades and other weapons stretched the factories beyond capacity. The Imperial commander implemented my recommendation that we build more, for what use is farmland when the foe's hand is at your throat?'

There was silence in the cell for a moment before Boreas's disembodied voice replied.

'Perhaps to feed those you were protecting?' the Chaplain suggested. 'When we liberated Tharsis from your tyranny, you had turned it into a wasteland. The sprawling factory-cities you had built were rife with destitution and crime. Is that what you bring for humanity?'

'It was a means to an end, not the end itself,' Astelan explained. 'Do not judge me on this, I have seen the Imperium you protect. Hive-worlds covered in desolate ash wastes, the populace crammed into kilometre-high spires like insects, labouring every hour, leeching every last handful of resource from their dead worlds to supply other planets with metal ore, machine parts, chemicals. And, of course, weapons and warriors for the armies of the Emperor.'

'It is through mutual need that the Imperium is held together,' said Boreas. 'Each planet dependent upon another for food, or machines, or protection.'

'And that is its weakness, for it is a fragile structure,' declared Astelan, sitting up again as far as he could, filled with a resurgence of energy. 'Self-serving Imperial commanders compete with each other, risking the defence of the Emperor's domains to further their own ends. The most heavily guarded system can fall if its neighbours are overrun, its food or water supplies taken away. It is a teetering labyrinth supported by self-interest and mutual fear, no longer driven by the great ideal that drove us to create it.'

'And this was the new way you were showing on Tharsis?'

'No, I am a warrior when all is said and done, with a warrior's instincts,' confessed Astelan. 'Though we were winning battles, it was destroying Tharsis. Yes, the factories spread and we began to conscript the citizens into the army, but it was needed for the war. As our strength grew, so our enemies became more cunning. They did not seek open battle, they clawed at us from their hiding places, sowing terror and uncertainty. From fastnesses in the wilderness they struck at our supplies, bombed our factories and killed our people. No matter

where our armies were, they were never big enough to root them all out, and the victories died away to be replaced by stalemate. We would find a cadre of rebels and crush it, they would slink into the towns and attack the factories and barracks. The larger the army grew, the more guns were needed, the more ration distribution centres, recruitment bases and supply convoys. And as these grew, so we needed more troops to protect them.'

'Your own ambition had become its sole purpose, your desire to rule fuelling itself.'

Astelan ignored the Chaplain's statement. 'The war dragged on for eight more years,' he continued. 'The army leaders were vague, the Imperial commander and his aides became passionless. Though we killed thousands of rebels every year, there were always more foolish and misguided souls to replace them. They had lost faith in the cause we were fighting for, the glory of the Emperor mired in the tribulations of battle and survival. The war had become an end in itself, not the victory.'

'And so what happened?' asked Boreas. 'Your authority was absolute when we toppled you from power.'

'You deliberately misrepresent events,' said Astelan with a sigh. 'I grew sick of the slaughter of the people I had slaved to free from those terrible times.'

'Times you yourself created.' Boreas's low voice was now just behind Astelan, he could feel the Chaplain's breath on his scalp.

'Have you not listened to a word I have said?' Astelan snapped with growing exasperation. 'You must now see why we fought you when you attacked. A whole generation of Tharsians died so that their descendants could fulfil their place in the Emperor's vision, they could not stand idle while you took it from them.'

'And so you took it upon yourself to take control, to usurp the Imperial commander and bring Tharsis your version of enlightenment,' Boreas said.

'No, not at first,' Astelan replied before stopping to cough, his throat dry. He heard movement behind him and Boreas's hand appeared with the goblet, filled with water. Astelan could not reach to take it, and the Chaplain dribbled the contents onto Astelan's parched lips. Gulping down the refreshing water, Astelan savoured the moment before continuing. 'Long had I advised the generals and colonels, but often they did not heed the wisdom of my experience. They continually doubted me, told me that what I asked of the army could only be expected of Space Marines. They were the old arguments, and though I spoke to them of striving towards greatness, of forging a new world in the crucible of

battle, my impassioned pleas fell on deaf ears. It was after one of our regiments was ambushed and all but wiped out in the passes of Tharzox that Imperial Commander Dax appointed me commander of Tharsis's loyal armies. I swore an oath to him that under my leadership, I would bring him victory within a year.'

'A bold claim… Another sign of your conceit perhaps?' Boreas said, accompanied by the scrape of metal on stone as he placed the goblet on the floor.

'An achievable goal, now that I had been given supreme authority and direct control,' answered Astelan. 'My first act was to execute the existing army commanders. They were old planetary nobility, bred to hunt game and attend extravagant banquets, not to lead men in battle. I replaced them with the best leaders from my sacred bands, men who were strong and capable, men with keen minds and iron discipline. I knew that to win the war against the renegades, there would be hard fighting ahead, and the men I chose to lead in my name were utterly loyal to the Emperor, men who would command without doubt and follow without question.'

'And did you fulfil your oath?' asked Boreas from the shadows.

'I did, within two hundred and fifty days,' Astelan declared proudly. 'The old regime had been weak and short-sighted. Their narrow minds were unable to comprehend the final goal, to understand the necessity of hardship and sacrifice. They had baulked at some of my measures, never truly understanding the ultimate goal of victory. Those two hundred and fifty days were full of turmoil and trauma; blood flowed and there was much suffering. But it was necessary for the future of Tharsis. If I had acted as my predecessors, the war would still be continuing, the people of Tharsis forced to live a half-life in subservience and fear. It would have been a long, slow death for the world.'

'And so you found a harsh cure for this planetary malady?' Boreas's voice was now tinged with anger, Astelan could hear the Chaplain breathing more deeply. 'You, their self-appointed saviour, led them out of the darkness.'

'And dark it was,' agreed Astelan, choosing to ignore the accusation in the Chaplain's statement. 'My commanders were brutal in the execution of my orders. Misguided tolerance had bred weakness, and my command was to show no mercy. We razed the breeding grounds of the rebels, burnt down the holes where they hid, executed their kin and those who supported them with their inaction. Though I am not proud of what I was forced to do, and there was much opposition from Dax's court, the Imperial commander gave me his full support. At that time, he alone could see my intent and understood what was necessary. I will not deny the fact that it was a pogrom of fearsome scale, and many that

might have been judged innocent were executed without recourse to considered judgement. But they were exceptional times, the people of Tharsis had to be shown the way, they had to understand that life under the rule of the Emperor is not given freely, it is earned with sacrifice – sacrifice of personal freedom, of labour and, when needed, of blood. Tharsis burned for two hundred and fifty days, as the cleansing continued. But on that last day, as I personally led my sacred bands on the attack, Tharsis's freedom was won!'

Astelan paused for breath, he was panting and sweating hard. While he had spoken, he had become more animated, as much as the bonds around his limbs and body allowed.

'You were not there,' he said to Boreas, interpreting the Chaplain's silence as disbelief. 'How can you understand our elation at the final victory, when you are so passionless, so devoid of life? We had driven them back for month after month, until we had forced them to make a last stand at the coast of the northern seas. Four thousand of them, that was all that remained. At my back were fifty thousand warriors, with me at the fore were twenty thousand of the sacred bands. There was nowhere for them to escape this time, nowhere to run, no lair to hide in. They were surrounded and we showed them no mercy. They fought well, to their credit, and not one of them attempted to surrender.'

'Would it have mattered?' Boreas asked.

'Not at all,' Astelan replied bluntly, his shrug making the chains around him rattle dully. 'They knew they were condemned to die, and they chose to die fighting. It took less than an hour, as the shells rained down and the sacred bands charged. I myself accounted for one hundred and eight of them. One hundred and seven I killed in battle, and at the end, Vazturan, greatest of my commanders and worshipped by the troops, brought me the last of the rebels, still alive. I remember, he was young, no more than twenty years old. He was wounded, shot in the arm, his face bloodied. His scalp was shaved and he had been tattooed with the symbols of the rebellion – the raven's head, the inverted aquila. I took him to the edge of the cliffs, and my army gathered round in their tens of thousands, many of them standing on tanks to get a view, jostling and scuffling with each other in their attempts to see a glimpse of the death of the last Tharsian renegade. I tossed the youth off the cliff onto the jagged rocks below and a great cheer welled up from the army. Such a noise equalled the victory chants of my Chapter when we conquered Muapre Primus.'

'A cause for great celebration, I can see,' Boreas snarled, stepping out of the darkness, showing true emotion for the first time since he had arrived. The

Interrogator-Chaplain unfolded his arms and took a step closer to Astelan. Without warning he lashed out, the back of his hand crashing across Astelan's face. The pain was momentary, but it was not supposed to hurt. It was an insult, a blow one would use to chastise an aspirant. The attack was filled with contempt, and conveyed Boreas's feelings more than any words could.

'I know what you did!' the Interrogator-Chaplain bellowed, his mouth right by Astelan's ear. 'There was an Administratum census-taker on Tharsis less than a decade before you arrived, before there was any war, before your bloodthirsty regime. The records we examined listed the population of Tharsis at just less than eight hundred million people. When you took power, you kept very good records. You listed your soldiers, the workers, the supervisors and their families. Your sacred bands controlled everything, and it was all noted down. I saw those records before I left. You were right to say a generation gave its life for you. Your own scribes estimated the population to be between two hundred and two hundred and fifty million, a quarter of the people you proclaim to have saved!'

'The war had its costs, sacrifices were made; do you not understand?' Astelan shouted back at him.

'You, an oath-breaker, a traitor to your own primarch, are guilty of genocide on a massive scale.' The Chaplain's voice had dropped to a venomous hiss.

'And you can say this with a clear conscience?' spat Astelan. 'The Dark Angels have no blood on their hands?'

'Oh, I agree that battle and sacrifice result in death,' Boreas replied with a grimace. 'I understand that we live in a brutal universe, and that amongst the unnumbered souls of the Imperium, a few million deaths are immeasurably minute. The Dark Angels have purged worlds that are beyond all attempts at redemption, and we have done it with joy for we know what we do is for the security of the future. Truly it is said that a moment of laxity spawns a lifetime of heresy.'

'Then you understand me!' Astelan felt a glimmer of joy. For the first time in two centuries, he thought that perhaps there were still those of enough mettle to forge an Imperium worthy of the Emperor. Perhaps the Dark Angels had not sunk so low as the others had taught him. 'You admit that you were wrong to attack me.'

'Never!' Boreas snapped, gripping Astelan's face in both hands, his mouth twisted in a feral snarl. 'Three hundred million Tharsians died after the war was declared over, when you usurped power. You had tasted blood, and you wanted more. You were depraved and vicious, delighting in the fear of those you ruled

over! Those who did not serve in your sacred bands lived in terror, that was how you maintained rule. There was no shared vision of the great Imperium, no collective effort to serve the Emperor. There were two million hired killers and two hundred million terrified slaves! How could a Chapter commander have fallen so low? Or perhaps you have always been like this. Perhaps blood-hungry maniacs were needed during the Great Crusade.'

'They were right, ten thousand years without the Emperor has made you weak,' Astelan dismissed the Chaplain's accusations and turned his head away.

'Who?' Boreas demanded.

'The others of my kind who I met on my long journey, the ones who had been in your universe longer than myself. I learnt much from them,' explained Astelan.

'And was Horus weak when he led his Legions against the Emperor, or was he strong because he left slaughter and devastation in his wake?' said Boreas, releasing his hold and stepping away.

'You compare me to the cursed Warmaster?' Astelan turned his head back to glare at Boreas. 'You think that I wanted those deaths, that I craved the spilling of blood?'

'I think the guilt of what you have done, the sins you have committed, have driven you mad,' Boreas said. 'You have lost your judgement, you were never fit to command a Chapter, and when your failings were exposed, you sought to hide behind bloodshed and horror. Did their screams block out the voices that cursed you for a renegade? Did the blood of three hundred million lives you yourself claim you were protecting wash away the stain of treachery?'

'What we fought for so hard, I could not risk losing again,' Astelan explained, resting his head back against the slab, staring at the featureless rock of the ceiling. 'I could not countenance another betrayal such as we suffered on Caliban. I had to guard against doubt, against the rumours and whispers that eat away at men's hearts and erode their will to rise up and claim what is theirs.'

'And so you rose up and claimed what was yours, is that how it transpired?' Boreas asked.

'When the war was over, the celebrations continued for a long time, but as ever, the people's euphoria passed eventually,' Astelan said, saddened by the memory. Though he was aware of the weakness of normal men, he could not truly understand it. 'How soon the Tharsians forgot what bound them together, when there was no enemy left for them to fight. There were murmurings against what had happened, nothing that you could trace or prove, but a swell of discontent.

They started doubting the validity of keeping the sacred bands armed, ignorantly claiming that because the war with the rebels was over, there was no need to maintain such an army. They didn't understand that winning the war for Tharsis was the first step on the road to greater glories. Forged in battle, the sacred bands were an army fit for the Emperor. The spirit of the Great Crusade still burned inside me, and here was a force that was worthy to take up the mantle that so many others had discarded.'

'You wanted to embark on a war of conquest, to further your grip on the worlds around Tharsis?' snapped Boreas.

'I wanted to show the galaxy what I had achieved!' argued Astelan, smashing his fist against the slab. 'I wanted to cast aside the doubts of ancient history and demonstrate to those with power that a way still existed for the Imperium to grow stronger. But Imperial Commander Dax, after I had revealed my aspirations to him, turned from me, just as El'Jonson had done a hundred centuries ago.'

The memory pained Astelan, like a knife twisting in his stomach. It had been a time of nightmare, his hopes suddenly dashed. Even now, the feeling of loss still haunted him. For a while he thought he had purged his soul of the regrets of the past, but to be discarded again had been too much.

'He told me that I had done him and Tharsis a great service, and I would be lauded for a hundred lifetimes.' Astelan continued. 'His words meant nothing to me, and suddenly his purpose became clear. Through me, he had done what he had not considered possible, and had allowed me to take the responsibility. Had my war with the rebels failed, then he had lost nothing, but he had everything to gain. Now he spoke of reducing the army, of instating captains and colonels from the old families again. I was horrified, but helpless. It was then, unbidden, that the sacred bands showed me the way. With no command from me, I swear by the Emperor, they besieged Dax's palaces. There was no one to resist them, all but a few soldiers in the whole army supported me as commander. Those few who spoke against the action were eliminated. Faced with such powerful opposition, the Imperial commander agreed to review his decision. But his cowardice got the better of him, and he was killed whilst trying to flee the palace.'

'How convenient for you,' the Chaplain retorted with a shake of his head. He crossed his arms and glowered at Astelan. 'The loyalty of your men must have been most gratifying, the death of the Imperial commander a timely incident.'

'I have no illusions that the soldiers had more than my great plans in mind,' admitted Astelan. 'During the rebellion, they had risked their homes and lives to

fight off the enemy, but I had ensured that the rewards for them matched my expectations. I know that the hearts of normal men are weak, they will never be like the Space Marines. As well as leadership and direction, they require incentive to rise above their inherent selfishness. And so they had lands, and good food. Each soldier had been provided with servants to see to their needs, so that they might concentrate on the fighting. I did not want them distracted by petty concerns.'

'You created a warrior class to rule over Tharsis, with yourself at its head,' Boreas concluded.

'With your cynical eye, it may seem so, but consider this,' replied Astelan, meeting the Chaplain's contemptuous stare. 'Even now, your power leeched away, the Legions divided, how many of the people within the Tower of Angels are not Space Marines. Tens, hundreds, thousands?'

'The Chapter is maintained by roughly five hundred serfs, servitors and tech-priests,' Boreas answered cautiously.

'Five hundred people for a thousand Space Marines, that does not sound too much,' Astelan said with a wry look. 'But what about beyond the walls of this fortress, on ships and in distant garrisons? The same number again? Probably many more. And the food you eat, the ammunition in your weapons, even the paint for your armour, where does this come from? Thousands, tens of thousands, labour every day so that you stand ready to fight, to guard them from the perils of the galaxy.'

'But the Dark Angels are a Space Marine Chapter, the only purpose of our existence is to fight battles, to wage war on the enemies of the Emperor,' argued Boreas. 'Worlds do not exist for that purpose.'

'Why? Why not?' Astelan became animated again. This was the crux of his vision. It seemed so plain to him – why could Boreas not understand? 'Caliban once did! So you see, that was my dream, that was what I was trying to create. The weak men in power feared the Legions, broke them apart so that now they are thrown to the corners of the galaxy, strewn across the stars and rendered impotent. The regiments of the Imperial Guard are clumsy, unwieldy weapons. I learnt much about them during my time on Tharsis, and I came to despise what they represent. They rely on the ships of the Navy, which are controlled by a different organisation. A whole branch of the Administratum, the Departmento Munitorum, is dedicated to the sole matter of shipping regiments to war zones, and providing them with supplies. This you know, but you don't really understand what it means. Scribes and bookkeepers wage the wars of the

Emperor now, not military officers. It is a shameful pile of politics and hierarchy, bogged down by its own complexity. Where has the vision gone? It was like my army on Tharsis had been, growing more unwieldy every passing day in an attempt to deal with its own unwieldiness. Who is there to carry on the Emperor's quest for a human galaxy free from danger? Clerks? Farmers? Miners?'

'And your way is better?' sneered Boreas. 'To place trust in someone like you, a man who unleashed unprecedented bloodshed upon a world you say you had adopted as your own?'

'You sound like the whining priests back on Tharsis!' snapped Boreas.

'The ones you murdered for speaking out against you?' said Boreas, stepping forward again, looming over Astelan.

'With the Imperial commander dead, it was the will of the people that I take his place.' Astelan was defiant, he would not let this interrogator bully him into admitting he was wrong when he knew in his heart that he was not. 'They recognised that really it had been I that had brought them success in the war. But the price of victory had been high, and soon the ruling class revealed themselves as the ingrates they were. While they had happily allowed the people of Tharsis to lay down their lives to protect them, the councillors, the cardinals and the aristocracy resisted my acceptance of authority. And the self-deluding hypocrites of the Ecclesiarchy were the worst of all. Since my awakening, I have seen first-hand the damage they have done. More than anything else it is their ridiculous mutterings and pompous sermons that have undermined the power of the Imperium.'

'And so you felt justified to eliminate them as well?' Boreas grabbed one of the chains and twisted it in his fist, tightening it across Astelan's muscled chest until it dug into his flesh. 'Perhaps you feared the power they had over your slaves. Were they the only true opposition your coup had, the only ones to rival your tenacious grip on the people of Tharsis? Was it jealousy of their privileged position and spiritual authority that incensed you?'

'Driven by meaningless dogma, they refused to endorse my claim as Imperial commander because I would not agree with them that the Emperor is a god,' argued Astelan, struggling against the tightening of the chains. 'Hah! I have walked alongside the Emperor, I have listened to Him speak, I have seen Him angry and sad. What do they know, with their carvings and paintings, their idolatry and superstitions? The Emperor is certainly more than a normal man, but a god? That was not his intent, and the fools who founded this Ecclesiarchy

committed a grave error. The Emperor is not some distant figure to be worshipped, He is the will behind us all, the power that drives man to surmount the trials that face us. It was He who said that mankind must furnish itself with a destiny, and now that message has been thrown aside, so that the weak-willed can blame a god for their own shortcomings.'

'You profess a closeness to the Emperor?' Boreas asked, releasing the chain so that it slapped against Astelan's skin.

'No, I do not.' Astelan shook his head. 'I was one of several thousand Chapter Masters, proud of my achievements, but no more worthy of His attention then any other. I met the Emperor just once, on Sheridan's World, and then only briefly. Whenever I have doubts, I recall that meeting and the memory gives me purpose again. He spoke only a few words to me, praising the campaign, complimenting the fervour of my Chapter. It is the one true regret I have that I was not with him when they rediscovered Caliban. Perhaps if I had been there, things might have been different. But with the return of the primarchs everything changed, it was never the same as it had been when we followed the Emperor alone.'

'And so you ordered your death squads to murder the priests, the cardinals and even the deans and choir boys,' Boreas hissed between gritted teeth.

'You exaggerate,' Astelan said, trying to wave his hand in rejection of Boreas's accusation, the gesture stifled by his bonds. 'They presented me with an ultimatum – acknowledge the Emperor as a god, or face another revolt. Their own words and actions betrayed their treasonous intent. I presented them with an ultimatum of my own – retract their threat and abandon the trappings and advantages that their false teachings had gained them, or be tried as traitors. Some accepted, others refused. I had no part in their judgement, but they were all found guilty and executed. Choir boys indeed!'

'But you did not stop with the priestly orders,' continued Boreas. 'You waged a war upon all the agents of the Imperium who did not agree with you, and then you waged a war against your own populace when they voiced discontent.'

'They resented my successes,' Astelan snorted in derision. 'The judges, the arbitrators, the witch-cursed astropaths, the Munitorum quartermasters and the teeming hordes of the Adeptus Terra. I took back the power they had stolen over ten thousand years, subtly usurping the Imperium from those the Emperor had conceived to create it. In their petty-mindedness and internecine squabbles they had obscured the original vision, bastardised the Imperial ideal. I had vowed to restore it, and they stood against me. But not once did I ever kill out of hand.

The people of the Imperium still know many of the great truths, but never truly think about the mottos and sayings they quote: *By the manner of their deaths, shall you know them,* is one that came to embody my rule. There were the loyal heroes who died in battle during the war, and there were the traitors who died on the gibbet afterwards. Tharsis shared my dream, they believed in me and the Emperor.'

'And so while you rebuilt your dreams of conquest, your sacred bands enforced curfew with boltguns, meted justice in the street with cudgels and blades and brutalised those who did not conform to that dream.' As he spoke, Boreas's fists clenched and unclenched slowly.

'I only wished harmony, of that I swear by my life,' protested Astelan. 'It was to banish the discord that has reigned since the Emperor defied Horus that I did what I felt was necessary.'

Boreas said nothing immediately. Instead, he turned away from Astelan and took a few paces towards the door, his head bowed in thought.

'But there was one dissenter who escaped your wrath,' the Chaplain said quietly.

'I do not understand,' replied Astelan. He was confused; who was this dissenter the Chaplain spoke of?

'Why do you think we came to Tharsis when we did?' asked Boreas, turning around, a look of triumph on his face. 'For seven decades you were there, isolating yourself from the rest of the Imperium. Who had ever heard of Tharsis? Certainly not the High Lords, and certainly not the Dark Angels. Your forces controlled the ships, so that none could leave without your permission, but you did not reckon on the faith and defiance of one man. He deserted your fleet, stealing a shuttle and flew it through an asteroid field to avoid pursuit. One deserter, though I suspect there were many others. He had no chance of survival, nowhere to go, but he felt the need to break free. And that was when coincidence, fate, destiny, or whatever you care to call it, paid interest in your affairs again. For fifty days he floated in space, on the verge of death, malnourished and severely dehydrated from drinking increasingly recycled water. Fifty days is not very far in the depths of space, but it was far enough for his transmissions for help to be intercepted by one of our ships that was patrolling the edges of the Tharsis system. His shuttle was recovered, and we learnt of the terrible events that had unfolded. And we learnt of you.'

'You attacked Tharsis because of the ravings of a madman?' Astelan said, his voice full of derision.

‘No, Commander Astelan, we did not,’ Boreas said slowly, taking measured paces towards him as he spoke, until he filled Astelan’s vision, his eyes glittering in the dim light of the brazier. ‘The memories of the Dark Angels go back a long time, back ten thousand years when those like you turned on their brethren and betrayed them. Little is now known about that time of anarchy, and few records of what transpired are left, but there is a list, a list kept by the Grand Master of Chaplains in a sacred box in the main chapel. For ten times a thousand years we have hunted the Fallen Angels that almost destroyed the Lion and his Legion, wherever they might be. We do not know how many of you there are, or where we might find you. But we have that list, and it contains the names of the hundred and thirty-six Space Marines who first swore allegiance to Luther when he rose against our primarch. Your name, Commander Astelan, is at the top of that list. We have been hunting you for a very long time, and now we shall learn the truth from you.’

Boreas turned and opened the door. There, swathed in robes, stood Samiel. The Librarian walked softly into the room and stood beside Astelan’s head. He reached down and the former Chapter commander tried to move his head aside, but his restraints did not allow him room. The psyker’s cold hands rested on his forehead, and Astelan felt a voice whispering at the back of his mind.

*You have deluded yourself for too long,* it sighed. *Now is the time when we strip away the lies. Now we strip away your delusions, until all that is left is the stark truth of your actions. You have hidden from the guilt at the core of your soul, but we will not allow you to hide any longer. You will know the shame and pain you have brought us, and you will repent of your evil ways.*

‘I have done no wrong!’ rasped Astelan, trying to shake his head free.

‘Liar!’ roared Boreas, and pain beyond anything he had ever endured before lanced through Astelan’s head.

‘Now we will begin again,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain told his prisoner. ‘Tell me of Tharsis.’

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## PART TWO

It was four days after the clash with the orks, and Boreas knelt in silent meditation in the outpost chapel. He was clad only in his white robe, a mark of his position within the elite warriors of the Chapter – the Deathwing. What the others did not realise was that it was also a mark of his membership within the secretive Inner Circle of the Chapter. Lifting the robe slightly, he knelt before an altar of dark stone inlaid with gold and platinum. The altar was at one end of the chapel, which itself was situated at the top of the five-storey Dark Angels keep in Kadillus Harbour, capital of Piscina IV. The chamber was not large, for space was at a premium in the small tower, big enough only for fifty people to attend the dawn and dusk masses that Boreas held every day.

Three of the keep's many non-Space Marine attendants were at work renewing the murals that covered the chapel's interior, failed aspirants who had nonetheless survived their trials. Two were busy reapplying gilding to a portrait of the Dark Angels primarch, Lion El'Jonson, which towered some three metres in height above the altar.

Boreas tried to block out the occasional creak and squeak of the painters' wooden scaffolding. The other was renovating a scene added after the Dark Angels' last defence of Piscina, when the ork warlords Ghazghkull and Nazdreg had combined forces and fallen upon the planet like two thunderbolts of destruction. For Boreas, that particular picture brought both pride and a little consternation. It depicted the defence of the Dark Angels basilica which had once served as their outpost in the capital. It was here that Boreas himself had led the fighting against the vicious alien horde on numerous occasions, as possession of the strategically vital strongpoint had changed hands back and forth for the whole campaign. It was during the battle for the basilica that Boreas

had lost his right eye to an ork powerfist, which had nearly crushed his head. Though eventually the orks had been driven out of the basilica, and the planet saved by an epic battle at Koth Ridge, so intense had been the fighting at the blood-soaked chapter house that after the orks had been defeated, the Dark Angels had been forced to abandon the fortified administration building and construct a new keep. The ruins themselves still stood a kilometre or so from where Boreas now knelt, a testament to the protection the Dark Angels had provided for countless millennia.

Reminded of the valiant battle-brothers whose dying words he had heard in those shattered rooms and corridors, and mindful of the great sacrifices that his fellow Space Marines had made, both the Dark Angels and those of the Harbingers Chapter, Boreas felt a tightness in his chest. Had the basilica really been that important, he asked himself yet again? Perhaps it had just been pride that had driven Master Belial to command Boreas to defend the building at all costs? In the end, the fighting in the dark cathedral had been but a sideshow of the campaign, the relative merits of the engagement inconclusive compared to the slaughter at Koth Ridge.

With a terse command, Boreas dismissed the serfs, their presence breaking his concentration as he was trying to focus on the oath of fealty he had pledged when he had joined the Inner Circle. They did not give him a second glance as they quietly picked up their tools and left, for which he was thankful. Despite the doubts he felt, he still had a duty as the Dark Angels commander in Piscina to show strong leadership and set an example to the others. If he showed weakness for a moment, it could cause unknown damage, not only to himself but also to those who looked to his wisdom and guidance with absolute trust. If that trust were to be broken, then only Boreas truly knew what acts of anarchy and corruption might follow.

Realising that it was not the presence of the serfs that was disturbing his meditation, but his own dark thoughts, Boreas decided that he would not quiet his troubled soul in isolation. Perhaps he might find more solace in the company of the five Space Marines under his command, he thought, and resolved to leave. Glancing only briefly at the half-gilded primarch in front of him, he turned and strode from the chapel, his bare feet padding loudly on the flagstones. Passing through the double doors that opened out of the sanctum, he turned and closed them behind him, the boom of the heavy wooden doors loud in the stillness of the keep. Turning left in the corridor, he crossed the tower to the armoury, where he hoped to find Hephaestus.

Boreas was proved correct as he stepped into the workshop of the Techmarine. Like most of the keep, the chamber was square and functional, the plain rockcrete of the walls unadorned. There, amongst the racks of weapons and worktables, accompanied by his five attendants, Hephaestus was seated at a workbench, working on Boreas's power armour. He had the chest plastron in a vice and was busily filing away at the scores cut into the breastplate during the battle against the orks. From beside him, one of his attendants occasionally dipped a ladle into a grail of sacred water and poured the contents over the mechanical file.

On Boreas's left were cases of bolters and crates of ammunition, all stacked neatly and marked with the brand of the Imperial eagle and the winged sword symbol of the Dark Angels. Next to them various swords and axes hung on the wall, amongst them chainswords, power swords and Boreas's crozius. They glistened in the light from the glowing strips in the ceiling, a tribute to the attention paid by Hephaestus, who lovingly cleaned them every night with blessed oils.

'And what brings you into my chamber, Brother-Chaplain?' Hephaestus asked, as Boreas realised he had been staring transfixed at the sheen on his crozius. The Techmarine was looking over his shoulder at Boreas.

'You were late for mass last night,' Boreas said, knowing he wasn't quite sure why he had come here.

'Come, come,' said Hephaestus, wiping his meaty hands on a white cloth and standing up from his bench. 'You know that I had to attend to my duties here, as I have every night since the fight at Vartoth.'

'Of course,' agreed Boreas, knowing full well that a Techmarine had dispensation from prayers if his attendance would interfere in the repair or upkeep of the Space Marines' wargear. 'I did not realise that our encounter had left you such a long task.'

'I would rather spend twenty hours repairing a bolter, than think for a moment that my battle-brothers had not committed fully to the fight in wayward consideration of my labours,' Hephaestus smiled. 'And I am paying particular attention to your armour, Interrogator-Chaplain, as it deserves.'

'Yes, I know of your love for the works of the artificer Mandeus,' Boreas said, allowing himself a rare smile. 'Did you not once say to me that you would die content if you could one day fashion a suit of armour half as great as the one that I inherited?'

'I might well have said that,' agreed Hephaestus, 'but in error. These days,

having worked with your armour so much, I have learnt much of Mandeus's techniques, and now I will only be content if I make a suit as good as this one!'

'Would you not prefer to better Mandeus's work?' Boreas asked, walking to the bench and looking at the scattered pieces of servos and artificial muscle-fibres that Hephaestus had removed from the breastplate.

'If I can emulate his skill with the tools I have here and the time I have, then I will judge myself the better artisan,' Hephaestus said quietly. Boreas gave him a questioning look and the Techmarine continued. 'The great artificers Mandeus, Geneon, Aster and their like all worked in the Tower of Angels, amongst the brethren, with acolytes to perform many of the duties that fill my days. You have seen the great armorium of our Chapter. It dwarfs the entirety of this keep!'

'You feel burdened by your post here?' Boreas asked quietly, knowing that he too felt the same constriction on his soul, the same chafing to be free of Piscina and its confines. 'You feel you could better serve the Emperor in the armorium with your fellow Techmarines?'

Hephaestus hesitated, his eyes gauging Boreas's expression. After a momentary glance at the attendants in the room, who were busying themselves with their duties and paying little heed to their masters, or so it appeared, he answered thoughtfully.

'We all have fought here, shed our blood on these volcanic islands to protect Piscina from the orks,' he said, his voice low as he bent close to the Interrogator-Chaplain. 'I stand ready to do so again, and will labour in this place until such time as the Grand Master of the Armorium sees fit to send another in my stead.'

'Yet you have not answered the question,' Boreas persisted with a sad smile. 'I do not seek to judge you, for have you not been raised to glory by your works? I cannot hold you to account for longing to tread in the steps of your great predecessors. You are a magnificent artificer, and your patience is a tribute to our Chapter. I cannot speak the minds of the Grand Masters, but when the Tower of Angels returns to us again, they shall know of your dedication and skill.'

'I sought not for praise, Brother-Chaplain,' Hephaestus said quickly. 'You asked me the question and I answered as honestly as I can.'

'You are worthy of the praise, all the more so because you do not seek it,' Boreas replied, placing a hand on his comrade's shoulder. 'I ask the question not from suspicion, but out of trust. I would not have you burdened with your thoughts and ambition; you must feel free to speak of them freely, to me or to the others. Only in wishing to rise to greatness ourselves can we maintain the honour and pride of the Chapter.'

‘In that case, might I ask you a question, Brother-Chaplain?’ Hephaestus said, looking closely at the Chaplain’s face.

‘Yes, of course,’ Boreas answered.

‘It is your eye,’ Hephaestus said. ‘You seem troubled of late and I wondered whether it was functioning properly… Is it causing you pain?’

‘It causes me constant pain, as you know, Hephaestus,’ Boreas replied, removing his hand and stepping back. ‘I would not have it any other way, for it serves as a reminder against complacency.’

‘I would still like to examine it for a moment, to allay my own fears,’ Hephaestus insisted.

‘You did a fine job with my eye,’ said Boreas. ‘It is good to measure yourself against your deeds, but you judge yourself too harshly.’

Seeing the determined looked in the Techmarine’s eye, Boreas gave a resigned nod and sat on the bench. Hephaestus bent over him, his fingers working deftly at the mechanism of the bionic organ, and with an audible click, the main part of its workings came free. Simultaneously, Boreas lost the sight in his right eye. It was not worrying for him – once a year Hephaestus would remove the eye to ensure it still worked smoothly. It was odd, however, that the Techmarine had asked to do so now, though, barely two months from his last check.

Taking a complex tool from his bench, Hephaestus unlocked the casing of the eye and slid the interior free. He delicately pulled free the lenses, polishing them on his cloth and setting them to one side, before delving inside the eye’s innards with fine tweezers. Boreas studied Hephaestus with his good eye as the Techmarine continued his work, watching the intensity on the artisan’s face as he examined his own construction. If Hephaestus was becoming overly concerned about Boreas’s well-being, then perhaps the others had noticed his change of mood as well. The Interrogator-Chaplain resolved to speak to them when he was done here, to gauge their mood and ask them some pertinent questions. The inactivity and routine, though they had trained for it, had become monotonous. It had been two years since the Tower of Angels had last visited and the isolation from the rest of the Chapter might well have started taking its toll on them as it had done on Boreas.

‘Everything appears to be functioning as it should be,’ Hephaestus reported, fitting the bionic eye back together and slotting it back into its socket. There was a brief tingle in Boreas’s right eye and then full vision returned to him. ‘However, I did notice some additional scabbing on the implant, as if the wound had opened again recently. You might ask Nestor to have a look at it.’

‘Thank you, I will,’ Boreas said, glad of the excuse to go and talk to the Apothecary, not that he needed to justify visiting those whose morale and discipline he was responsible for preserving. ‘Will I see you at mass this evening?’

Hephaestus paused and looked around the armoury, assessing his workload. He looked back at Boreas and nodded his head once before sitting down again at his workbench and picking up the mechanical file. The rasping teeth buzzed into life behind Boreas as he walked from the chamber.

The Interrogator-Chaplain walked down the spiral stair at the centre of the keep to the level two storeys below. Here was the apothecarion, the domain of Nestor and medical centre for the outpost. When Boreas entered, there was no sign of the Apothecary. The harsh glowstrips in the ceiling reflected off shining steel surfaces, meticulously arranged surgical tools, phials of drugs and elixirs set in rows on long shelves. The room was dominated by three operating tables in its centre. Unsure where Nestor might be if not here, Boreas walked to the comm-unit by the door and pressed the rune for general address to the keep.

‘This is Boreas, Apothecary Nestor to report,’ he said and released the activation stud. It was a few seconds before the response came through, the display on the comm-unit signalling an incoming transmission from the vaults set deep into the tower’s foundations.

‘Nestor here, Brother-Chaplain,’ the Apothecary answered.

‘Please come up to the apothecarion, I have a matter I wish to discuss with you,’ Boreas said.

‘Affirmative. I will be there shortly,’ Nestor replied.

Boreas walked over to the nearest operating table and looked at his reflection in its gleaming metal surface. Many times he had been in such a place, either as a patient or to provide spiritual support for those undergoing surgery. He had also spent too many occasions in an apothecarion saying the rites of passing over a dying battle-brother, while an Apothecary had removed the progenoid glands so that the sacred gene-seed might be passed on to future warriors. It was the most important function any Apothecary could perform, and essential to the survival of the Chapter.

New gene-seed was all but impossible to create – certainly no Chapter Boreas knew of had ever achieved such a feat – and so future generations of Space Marines relied solely on the vital gene-seed storage organs that every Space Marine was implanted with. Every Marine had two progenoids, and in theory his

death could help create two replacements. But despite the daring and brave efforts of the Apothecaries, too many progenoids were lost on the field of battle before they could be harvested to ever ensure the continued existence of a Chapter. It was the task of the Chaplains to teach every Space Marine of the legacy he held within himself, to educate them in their duty to the continued glory of the Chapter. A Space Marine was taught that although he may be asked to sacrifice his life at any moment, he should never sell his life in vain, for by doing so he betrayed those who would come after him.

There was a popular Imperial saying: *Only in death does duty end*. But for the Space Marines, even death did not bring an end to their duty to protect mankind and the Imperium the Emperor's servants had created. In death they lived on in newly created Space Marines. Some, those whose physical bodies could not be saved, might be interred in the mighty walking tanks called dreadnoughts, to live on for a thousand years as gigantic warriors encased in an unliving body of plasteel, adamantium and ceramite. In such a way, over ten thousand years of the Imperium, there was a bond of brotherhood from the very first Space Marines to those who had only just been ordained as Scouts of the Tenth Company. It was this very physical relationship that bound together every warrior of the Chapter. Not merely for tradition's sake were they called battle-brothers.

Or so the litanies taught, but Boreas knew different. He had learnt many things when he had become a member of the Deathwing, the elite Inner Circle of the Dark Angels. He had learnt yet more during his interrogation of the Fallen Angel, Astelan, things which even now still troubled him.

The hiss of the hermetically sealed doors opening heralded the arrival of Apothecary Nestor. Of the five Space Marines currently under Boreas's command, Nestor had been a Space Marine for the longest, and by quite some margin. Boreas had served as one of the Dark Angels for nearly three hundred years, but at over six hundred years old Nestor was one of the oldest members of the Chapter. Boreas did not know why the veteran had not risen higher, why he had never been admitted to the Deathwing. Nestor was one of the finest Apothecaries on the field of battle, and Boreas owed his life to him when he had been wounded in the battle for the basilica. Nestor had also been honoured for his heroic fighting during the first ork assault on Koth Ridge.

In looks, the Apothecary was even more grizzled than Boreas. His thick, waxy skin was pitted and scarred across his face, and six service studs were hammered into his forehead, one for every century of service. His eyes were dark and his head shaved bald, giving the medic a menacing appearance that was entirely at

odds with the conscientious, caring man Boreas knew him to be. That care was not to be mistaken for weakness, though; in battle Nestor was as fierce as any warrior Boreas had fought alongside.

'How can I help you?' the Apothecary asked, walking past Boreas and leaning back against the operating table. Boreas thought he caught a flicker of something in Nestor's eye, a momentary flash of nervousness.

'Hephaestus says my eye might have shifted in the wound, and he recommended that you examine it,' Boreas said quickly, looking directly at the Apothecary.

'Perhaps it became dislodged at Vartoth,' suggested Nestor, standing upright and indicating for Boreas to lie down on the table. The Interrogator-Chaplain did so, staring up at the bright lamp directly above the examination slab. Nestor disappeared for a moment before returning with one of his instruments, with which he gently probed at the cauterised flesh on the right side of Boreas's face. Most of it was in fact artificial flesh grafted on the metal plate that replaced much of Boreas's temple, cheek and brow. He could feel the point dully prodding at his face as the Apothecary examined the old wound. With a grunt, Nestor straightened up.

'There seems to be some tearing on the graft, nothing serious,' Nestor commented. 'Is it causing you discomfort?'

'No more than usual,' said Boreas, sitting up and swinging his legs off the table. 'Do you think it could worsen?'

'Over time, yes it will. Some of the capillaries have retracted, others have collapsed, and the flesh is dying off slowly. It would require a new graft to heal completely.' Nestor glanced around the apothecarion for a moment before continuing. 'I do not have the facilities here to perform such a procedure, I am afraid. I will provide you with a solution to bathe your face in each morning, which should hopefully slow the necrofication. There is no need to worry about infection, your body is already more than capable of cleansing itself of any kind of disease you might pick up on Piscina.'

'Hephaestus will be pleased,' said Boreas. 'He worries overmuch.'

'Does he?' Nestor asked quietly, placing his instrument in an auto-cleanser concealed within the wall of the apothecarion.

'Your meaning?' Boreas said, standing up and adjusting his heavy robe. 'You have just confirmed that there is no cause for concern.'

'With your eye, that is true,' Nestor said over his shoulder. He removed the probe and returned it carefully to its place amongst the scalpels, mirrors, needles

and other tools of his craft. ‘However, one cause for the loss of blood to your graft might be stress on the rest of your body.’

‘You think I need a fuller examination?’ Boreas asked, looking down at himself. ‘I feel healthy.’

‘That is not what I mean,’ Nestor replied with a slight shake of his head.

‘Then say what you mean,’ snapped Boreas, tired of this subtle innuendo. ‘What do you think is wrong?’

‘Forgive me, Brother-Chaplain,’ Nestor bowed his head in acquiescence. ‘I was merely making an observation.’

‘Well, make your observation clearer, by the Lion!’ barked Boreas.

‘Out of all of us, it must be hardest for you to be garrisoned here, away from our brethren,’ Nestor stated, raising his gaze to meet Boreas’s.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Boreas.

‘When we are troubled, it is to you we turn to remind us of our sacred duties, to refresh the vows we have all pledged,’ Nestor explained softly. ‘When we lament the inactivity of our post, when we crave the companionship of the others, it is you who gives us guidance and wisdom. But to whom does the guide turn?’

‘It is because of my faith and strength of mind that I was chosen to become a Chaplain,’ Boreas pointed out. ‘It is our role to pass on that inner strength to others.’

‘Then forgive my error,’ Nestor said quickly. ‘One such as I, who on occasion has doubts, and who must be steered along the bloody path we walk, cannot understand what mind you must have to walk that path alone.’

‘No more than I can understand the purposes of the machines in this chamber, or the secrets of the Caliban helix within our gene-seed, like you can,’ Boreas answered after a moment’s thought. ‘No more than I can understand the workings of this fake eye which Hephaestus manufactured for me from cold metal and glass, and yet he gives it a semblance of life.’

‘Yes, I suppose we each have our purpose here on this world,’ agreed Nestor, slapping Boreas on the arm. ‘Hephaestus for the machines, myself for the body. And you, Brother-Chaplain, for our mind and souls.’

‘And so, I ask you in return what troubles you have,’ Boreas said, seeing his opportunity to steer the conversation onto a track more to his liking. He was certain that Nestor was not questioning his thoughts or his loyalty, but the more he spoke about such things, the more Boreas heard the laughter of Astelan ringing in his ears.

‘I am content,’ Nestor replied. ‘I have served the Emperor and the Lion for six

centuries, and perhaps if I am fortunate I may serve him yet for two more. But I have done my duty. I have bathed in the white-hot fires of battle and created new generations of Dark Angels. The things I once strived to prove to myself and my brothers I have now done, and all that remains is to pass on what I know and retain the pride and dignity of our Chapter. If fate and the Supreme Grand Master see fit for me to end my days on Piscina IV, I shall not be the one to argue against it.'

'You are surely too experienced to be given such a mundane duty though,' said Boreas, crossing his arms tightly. 'With such experience as you have, do you not think your time would be better spent in the Tower of Angels teaching those who will follow after you? Acting as nursemaid to a Chaplain with a broken eye is hardly worthy of your talents.'

'Are you trying to provoke me, Brother-Chaplain?' Nestor said harshly. 'I follow the will of the Emperor and I say again that I am content. Piscina is a recruiting system, not just some watch post or augury. It is because of my skill and experience that I can judge those who might come after. I am entrusted in more ways than you can know with the Chapter's future.'

'I did not seek to belittle what you do here, my words were perhaps ill-judged and for that I apologise,' Boreas hastily replied, uncrossing his arms and taking a step towards Nestor. The Apothecary smiled and nodded in acceptance of Boreas's apology. With a last glance, Boreas turned away and walked towards the door.

'Brother-chaplain,' Nestor called after him, and he stopped and turned. 'Are you not forgetting something?'

'I can recite the three hundred verses of the Caliban Chronicles, I do not forget things,' Boreas pointed out.

'Then you don't want the elixir for soothing your face?' Nestor said.

'Bring it to me at this evening's meal,' Boreas replied with a smile.

Boreas continued down the stairwell to the next level in search of the other senior member of his squad. He paused at the landing and gazed out of the thick glass of the narrow window, collecting his thoughts. Thick smog obscured most of the view, so that the towers and factories in the distance were only vague silhouettes. A bird fluttered past close by, before disappearing into the brownish-grey clouds. As he watched it fade into the distance, he realised that the conversations with Hephaestus and Nestor had shown him that he needed to spend more time with the others, rather than dwell on his own misgivings. That

they thought he somehow doubted them, that he was subtly testing them, proved to him that they had become unaccustomed to his company. Turning away from the window, he continued down the stairs to the first storey.

Here were the quarters for the aspirants, and Boreas knew he would find Veteran Sergeant Damas in the gymnasium with them, continuing the rigorous physical training they started as soon as they were brought to the keep. Although Boreas was in command of the outpost, the aspirants were Damas's responsibility. Having attained the rank of veteran sergeant, he had been moved to the Tenth Company as part of the recruiting force. Like the others on Piscina, Damas had received honours for his conduct during the ork invasion. He, along with his Scout squad and the now legendary Sergeant Naaman, had infiltrated the ork lines and, after gathering vital intelligence on the enemy, destroyed one of the relays the aliens had been using to power their massive orbital teleporter. It had been a huge setback to the ork advance, and though Damas was seriously wounded whilst the infiltrators retreated, he had held off the ork counter-attack long enough for his squad to get away.

Damas was amongst the fourteen youths under his tutelage. Nearly half as tall again as his charges, even without his armour, he was a giant even by the standards of the Space Marines. When Boreas entered, the aspirants were seated in a circle around the veteran sergeant. Boreas listened in for a moment, standing in the shadow of the doorway.

'Your first weapon is your body,' Damas was telling his attentive audience. 'Even before you are given bones and muscles like mine, I can teach you how to break a man's neck with a single blow. I can show you how to crush his internal organs with your fists, disable him with your fingers and cripple him with your elbows and knees.'

He bent down and placed his plate-sized hand on the head of one of the youths.

'With the strength given to me by the Apothecaries and my faith, I can pulp your brain in a second,' he told the boy, who laughed nervously, eliciting more laughter from the others. 'More than that, I can withstand any attack you might make on me.'

Damas instructed the youths to stand up, and pointed at one of them, telling him to hit him as hard as possible. Hesitantly, the boy approached.

'I will not strike back,' Damas assured the boy. 'But if you hesitate to follow my orders again, I will have you thrashed.'

Chastened, the boy charged with a shrill yell and flung his fist at Damas's abdomen. The blow would have merely winded an ordinary man, by Boreas's

reckoning, and it failed to even rock Damas on his heels. The boy gave a squeal and clutched his bruised knuckles. Boreas chuckled, along with the aspirants. The only vital part of a Space Marine not protected by his black carapace was his head. Hearts, lungs, stomach, chest, all were impervious to any unarmed blow from even the strongest assailant.

Hearing the Chaplain's mirth, Damas looked over. Following their instructor's gaze, the aspirants caught sight of Boreas and fell instantly into a solemn silence, their heads bowed. Boreas walked in, and clapped a hand to the back of the lad who had attacked Damas, nearly knocking him from his feet.

'A brave attempt,' Boreas said, helping the boy to steady himself. He recognised him as Beyus, one of the two hopefuls he had brought in just before the battle at Vartoth. He had evidently recovered from his crippling shock. In just the few days that had passed since his arrival, the boy was already changed. His head was shaved bald, and all the puppy fat was gone from his strong torso. The boy stood straighter, and his gaze was fiercer than before. Damas was doing a good job.

'Run!' barked Damas, clapping his hands twice, and with no further words the boys began to jog around the wall of the gymnasium, which stretched across the whole floor of the tower. Their pounding bare feet on the wooden boards masked the two Space Marines' conversation.

'I see things are proceeding well,' Boreas started, looking at the running youths.

'They are a good selection. The last two in particular show a lot of potential,' agreed Damas with a nod. Then his look darkened slightly. 'But only fourteen this season? The Tower of Angels will be here in less than half a year, and they will be expecting thirty recruits for second-stage testing.'

'Would you rather we fell short of our quota, than passed on boys who will fail within minutes?' asked Boreas. 'If the quality is not there, it is not there.'

'You know what I am talking about,' Damas insisted. 'I cannot understand your reluctance.'

'You are referring to the eastern tribes?' Boreas replied. 'You think we should take our recruits from those savages?'

'They are all savages,' countered Damas with a shrug. 'I see no distinction.'

'And yet I do,' the Chaplain replied. 'I have told you before that they are too bloodthirsty, even for our purposes. If we still had a whole company stationed here I would exterminate them. Some of their practices are, well, bordering on the intolerable. They have stopped worshipping the Emperor, and have reverted to a barbarism I fear even we cannot strip them of with a decade of training.'

‘They remind me much of my own people of Slathe,’ Damas commented pointedly. ‘Perhaps your judgement of them is overly harsh.’

‘Perhaps your continual persistence with this matter indicates other reservations,’ suggested Boreas. ‘It has been several months now since we have spoken about anything else.’

‘I see the numbers of aspirants dwindling, and it causes me concern, that is all,’ Damas replied calmly. ‘I feel it is my duty to remind you of the options available to us. No disrespect of your position is intended, I understand that we each have our own duties and codes to which we must adhere.’

‘Perhaps it is their similarity to the tribes of Slathe that burdens you,’ Boreas said.

‘You think I perhaps yearn for my homeworld?’ asked Damas with a frown.

‘Yearn is too strong a word, I do not for a moment doubt your loyalty to the Dark Angels,’ Boreas replied. ‘It is a wise tradition that we are not posted to our homeworlds, for fear of what that might bring. Perhaps it was an error for you to be here, near a world so similar to the one you came from.’

‘I do not see it as an error,’ argued Damas. ‘My home world is now the Tower of Angels and has been for two centuries. Slathe is just one of many worlds I have sworn to protect.’

‘Then it is I who have erred,’ conceded Boreas with a gracious nod. ‘I do not wish you to think that I have any reservations about your performance. I am here as your guardian and advisor, I wish you to feel free to express any anxieties you may have.’

‘Then I am anxious that we have so few recruits, and that is all,’ Damas said quietly.

‘Very well, I shall note your recommendations in my journal, so that if we fall below our quota, no blame shall be attached to you,’ promised Boreas.

‘It is not blame that concerns me, Brother-Chaplain, it is the future strength of our Chapter,’ Damas corrected the Interrogator-Chaplain.

‘Then I shall make my entry reflect that,’ said Boreas. ‘Their numbers notwithstanding, you are happy with this batch of aspirants?’

‘All have improved their skills, and met my expectations,’ confirmed Damas, clapping his hands twice again. In a rush of feet, the aspirants gathered around the two Space Marines, attentive to their instructor.

‘I shall leave you to your pupils,’ said Boreas, and turned to leave. As he walked out of the door, he heard the veteran sergeant commanding his group to break into pairs for unarmed combat practice.

Boreas's thoughts were disturbed. There was something amiss, he could feel it. On the face of it, everything was proceeding as normal, but he detected an undercurrent amongst his command. It was hard to pinpoint, but he could sense their slight reproach. Like him, they were frustrated, virtually marooned here in the Piscina system while their battle-brothers sought glorious battle hundreds, if not thousands, of light years away. Or perhaps it was only his own impotence that he was projecting on to them. The others chafed slightly perhaps at their posting, but maybe that was all. It was not entirely unexpected. Nestor, of all of them, seemed the most comfortable with their situation. But that in itself could be problematic. Had the old Apothecary resigned himself to his future? Had he lost his drive? Was he merely looking to his death now, perhaps jaded by his long service?

Before he checked on Battle-Brothers Thumiel and Zaul, the Chaplain decided he needed more time to think on this matter. He strode back up the stairwell to the very top of the tower, out onto the observation and gun platform on its roof. From here he could look out across Kadillus Harbour and up at the great volcano on the flanks of which it was built. The strengthening breeze gusted over his face and set his robe flapping, refreshing his mind. He frequently came up here when the confines of the chapel stifled his thoughts rather than letting them flow. He walked first to the south parapet, and looked down the slopes towards the sea.

Here was the industrial heart of Kadillus Harbour. Here were the massive docks where the enormous ocean-going harvesters came and went, and the high cranes and gantries that criss-crossed the bay to unload their cargoes of gas and minerals dredged from the sea floor. Factories spilt around the harbour like a stain, gouting smoke as they processed ore and smelted metals for transportation off-planet. Here were the hab-blocks, vast rockcrete structures crammed with the million-strong workforce of Kadillus Harbour. Night was closing in and soon the loud klaxons and sirens would signal the end of the day shift and the start of the night watch. When dark descended, the thousands of furnaces and smelting works would light the sky with red.

Boreas walked around the parapet and looked out eastwards. Here was the richer district, and close by the old ruins of the ancient basilica. Beyond the towering spires of the planetary nobles and the sprawling palaces of the Imperial commander, the Lady Sousan, lay Koth Ridge. It had been there that the Dark Angels and the Imperial Guard had made their stand against the orks. If that defence had failed, the two greenskin forces would have been able to unite and the planet would have surely fallen.

It was there, on that barren rocky stretch of ground, that thousands of Guardsmen and nearly one hundred Space Marines held off a seemingly endless alien horde. Boreas had not been there, for he had still been fighting in Kadillus itself. But he had heard the tales of victory and heroism with pride. The battle-brothers of the Dark Angels had fought hard and taken terrible losses, but their blood had secured victory and saved Piscina from being enslaved. Had Piscina IV fallen, then the orks would have met no resistance when they descended on Piscina V. The tribesmen would have been slaughtered or enslaved, and another world would have been lost to the Dark Angels forever.

Boreas couldn't help but reflect bitterly on the events of the past five years. Once, an entire company had been stationed here under the command of Master Belial. Now, only he and a handful of the campaign's veterans were left to defend the future of the Chapter. The Tower of Angels returned less and less frequently, and Boreas wondered how quickly those great deeds might be forgotten.

Continuing his circuit, Boreas looked to the north. The first thing he saw was the massive open apron of Northport, where starships landed and took off every week, bringing vital supplies and in return taking the mineral wealth of the planet away to distant systems. There was something amiss though. Concentrating, Boreas saw wisps of dark smoke snaking like tendrils from the streets that approached the starport. He could also make out the distant orange flicker of flames.

The Interrogator-Chaplain ran to the nearest gun turret and stepped inside. He flicked on the comm-unit and punched the stud for the command centre at the base of the tower. Zaul would be on duty at the moment.

'This is Boreas. Have you received any unusual communications from the north of the city?' asked Boreas.

'Negative, there have been no abnormal communications today,' Zaul replied after a moment. 'Is there a problem?'

'Connect me through to the headquarters of Colonel Brade,' commanded Boreas, activating the turret control systems. As the motors whirred into life, the comm crackled as Zaul fed it through the main aerial that towered from the centre of the keep. Manipulating the controls with one hand, he directed the emplaced gun to rotate towards the north, while he watched the long-range sensor screen. There on the screen, he could clearly see a number of fires blazing in the streets, the smoke filling the canyon-like roadways.

'Lord Boreas?' the comm spat into life.

‘Colonel Brade. I am currently observing some form of disturbance near to Northport,’ Boreas said. ‘Please explain the situation.’

‘There has been some rioting, my lord,’ Brade replied. ‘A few hundred individuals only, the Imperial commander’s security forces are attempting to contain them as we speak.’

‘Please inform whoever is in charge of the operation that I will be joining him shortly,’ Boreas said, looking at the growing blazes on the monitor.

‘I don’t think that will be necessary, my lord,’ Brade said, his voice terse. ‘I am sure the Imperial commander’s men are capable of handling the situation.’

‘I wish to observe these events personally, please inform the ground commander to expect my arrival.’ Boreas cut the link and powered down the turret. He strode quickly across the roof to the stairs and hurried down them, all the way to the first subterranean level. Jumping the last few steps, Boreas entered the fortress’s garage. Here, two slab-sided Rhino armoured carriers sat in the gloom, and three combat bikes. It was to the bikes that he went. With huge reinforced tyres, armour plating and built-in bolters, each was closer in size to a small roadcar than a motorcycle, designed for Space Marines to make rapid hit-and-run strikes inside enemy-held territory. Boreas found them useful for travelling the winding city streets of Kadillus on the few occasions when he actually left the outpost, usually to attend traditional ceremonies with the Imperial commander.

Sitting astride the machine, he thumbed the engine into life, its mechanical growl echoing around the garage. Boreas opened up a comm-link to the command chamber.

‘Monitor all local transmissions, I am heading to the Northport area to find out what is happening,’ he told Zaul.

‘I have your tracker on the oracle-screen,’ confirmed the battle-brother. The transponder built into the bike’s chassis would transmit its position every few seconds, allowing the other Space Marines to home in on its location rapidly should the rider encounter danger or fail to report on schedule.

‘Open the gate,’ ordered Boreas before gunning the engine and releasing the clutch. With a plume of blue smoke in his wake, he roared up the ramp and out into the twilight of the city.

Passing between the armoured bastions of the gatehouse, Boreas moved rapidly up through the bike’s gears until he was racing down the streets, his robes flapping in the wind. The occasional roadcars and heavy, slab-sided transporters on the road slowed to let him pass. It was at the height of the work-shift and the

streets were almost deserted. Either side of him the grim buildings of Kadillus sped past, and he saw brief glimpses of the surprised faces of the few citizens on the streets. It was not often that they saw one of their mysterious, superhuman guardians, and some of the pedestrians began running along after him, shouting out blessings and praise.

It took only a few minutes of riding before the sky ahead of Boreas was thick with black smoke. There were crowds gathering, but they parted easily as he nosed the bike forward, more cautiously now the streets were beginning to fill with people. He spotted the dark red uniform of a Kadillus security enforcer, and swung the bike over next to her. The woman, her head and eyes concealed behind a reflective glass visor, gaped openly as he came to a stop just ahead of her. In her hands she held a lasgun, which began to tremble in her nervous grasp.

'Who is in charge, and where can I find them?' asked Boreas, leaning towards the enforcer. He dwarfed the woman and she was obviously intimidated by his presence.

'Lieutenant-at-arms Verusius,' the woman replied breathlessly. 'He's at the worst of the rioting. Head west at the next junction.'

'Stop any more people arriving in the area,' Boreas told her.

'We're trying to do that now,' she replied, taking a step back.

'Good,' Boreas said, revving the engine and riding off. More and more security personnel could be seen as he approached the junction, another kilometre along the road. The citizens were more numerous as well, being held back by the cordon. Their scrabbling and surging halted as the Space Marine pulled into view, and the crowds parted to let him pass, shouts spreading out to herald his progress.

Soon he saw the front line ahead. Smoke billowed overhead and dozens of enforcers were stood in a line across the road. He could see an armoured groundcar parked nearby, and a small group of officers standing next to it. They all turned in unison as the bike screeched to a halt behind the roadcar.

'Lord Boreas!' one of them exclaimed. In his hand, he gripped a comm-unit, which occasionally squawked bursts of incomprehensible noise. 'I'm honoured!'

'You are Lieutenant-at-arms Verusius?' Boreas asked the young man.

'No, I am,' said an older, shorter security man. He wore no helmet, and his uniform was a long red coat with gold piping. His face was broad and split by a dark moustache, his thinning hair cropped short. 'As I assured Colonel Brade when he offered assistance, everything is under control.'

'I have no doubt of that, I merely wish to find out what is occurring,' Boreas

said.

'It's been building for months,' Verusius said gruffly. 'There's been unrest in the factories, people have started talking about the mysterious portents they've been seeing, like the freak storms in the middle of dry season, the mines all hitting dead seams in the space of a few weeks, strange mutated creatures attacking the ocean harvesters. Rumour went around that the astropaths were seeing whirls of blood in their dreams, and heard the screams of dying children. There's been more fights than usual, people even getting killed in brawls, and now this.'

'That still does not explain this outbreak of disobedience,' Boreas replied. 'Something, or someone, must have instigated this unrest.'

'A starship arrived this morning and docked at the orbital station,' explained Verusius. 'A story began to circulate that their Navigator had suffered some form of attack, that he'd been dragged out of his pilaster with blood streaming from his face, as if every blood vessel in his body had split. We tried to stop the rumours from spreading, ordered a security shutdown on the spaceport, but word got out anyway. People started flocking here for news, then it got ugly.'

'Why was none of this brought to my attention?' Boreas demanded. 'This information is pertinent to the security of our outpost.'

'That's nothing to do with me, you'll have to contact the Imperial commander's aides,' said Verusius with a shrug. 'If it gets any worse, we'll have to give the order to open fire.'

'No!' snapped Boreas with a glance at the security officers. 'There will be no unnecessary deaths. Allow me to assess the situation. I will inform you of further action to take.'

He walked further down the street, and saw that the rioters had built barricades of burning carts and tyres. They were throwing chunks of masonry at the enforcers, and hurling flaming brands into the buildings either side of the street. The security men and women had formed a rough line across the main boulevard leading to the starport, preventing the rioters access to the area, which was also close to the Imperial palaces. Boreas stepped up behind the line and gazed over the heads of the enforcers at the rabble further down the street. Those just in front of him glanced over their shoulders, startled.

There were some two hundred people in the mob, many carrying burning torches and improvised weapons of some kind. The street was filled with the cacophony of the riot, but Boreas's keen hearing could distinguish every sound. Their shrieks and shouts sounded over the crackling of the fires, the splintering

of wood and the crash of breaking glass. He could smell the smoke from the fires, the sweat of bodies, the blood spilt in puddles across the street.

The red splashes of uniforms stood out against the black rock of the road where injured enforcers lay, their comrades unable to rescue them in the teeth of the rioters' fury. Boreas pushed his way through the line, one of the enforcers stumbling to his knees as the burly Space Marine eased past.

Boreas began to walk towards the rioting mob, as bricks and chunks of masonry splintered on the road around him. Within a few seconds, as the rioters caught sight of him, the rain of missiles faltered and then stopped; the shouting quietened and silenced. In a matter of moments, the Chaplain's sheer presence had quelled the violence, his appearance alone enough to drive thoughts of disobedience from the rioters' minds. Now it was replaced with fear and awe. Boreas was ten strides from the front of the mob, and continued his slow, purposeful walk. Just as the other citizens had done beforehand, the awed crowd split in front of him, forming into a circle as he stopped in the middle of the group. Only the crackling of flames and the odd chink of broken glass sliding under the feet of the protestors broke the silence that greeted him.

He gazed at those around him, their expressions of anger and hate now replaced by barely-contained terror. Many started crying, some fell to their knees and vomited from the shock. Others started gibbering prayers to the Emperor, bricks and clubs dropping from their grasp and clattering onto the rockcrete. Eventually silence fell, and all Boreas could hear was panicked panting and the hammering of hearts. None met the angered stare of the Interrogator-Chaplain as his eyes passed over the subdued crowd.

Boreas's own anger subsided as he looked at the people. These were not heretics to be killed; these were not malcontents intent on rebellion. They were citizens whose fear had turned to anger, who were crying out for guidance and help.

'Forgive us, my lord, forgive us!' begged one of the rioters, a scrawny man in the uniform of a Northport cargo loader, throwing himself at Boreas's feet. 'We did not seek to incur your wrath!'

'Be at peace!' Boreas declared, looming over the huddle of scared people. He reached down and pulled the prostrate man to his feet. 'Lay down your weapons, put aside your anger and fears. Look upon me and remember that the servants of the Emperor watch over you. Do not be afraid, for I am here as your guardian, not as your executioner.'

The crowd stood silently watching the Space Marine, casting glances at each

other.

'But we are afraid, my lord,' the port worker told Boreas. 'A time of darkness is coming, we have seen the omens, we have heard the portents.'

'And I am here to protect you,' Boreas assured them. 'My brethren and I are here to watch over you, to guard you from danger. I stand here as a representative of the Dark Angels, a warrior of the Emperor, and I am here to remind you of the sacred oaths that bind our fate to yours. I renew that pledge here and now! I swear by the honour of my Chapter and my own life that I and my battle-brothers will lay down our lives in the defence of your world, whatever may beset us.'

'What is to become of us?' someone called out, a tall woman with blood in her blonde hair and a gash down the side of her face.

'I cannot blame you for your fears,' Boreas said. 'But I cannot pardon your actions. You cannot rise up against the servants of the Emperor and go unpunished. I shall request that the Imperial commander be lenient, but I ask you now to give yourselves to the mercy of your ruler, and subject yourself to the judgement of her judiciary. Who amongst you counts themselves leaders of this disturbance?'

There was some murmuring and three men stepped forward hesitantly, their heads bowed with shame. All three were similarly dressed in the overalls of port workers, supervisor badges stitched to their chests.

'There was another one!' somebody called out. 'He was the one who started it all!'

'An offworlder, he was there giving speeches,' another voice added.

'Tell me about this man,' Boreas demanded of the ringleaders. It was the oldest who replied, a man in his middle years with thick curly hair and a long beard.

'He worked on a ship that lies in orbit, it was his shuttle that brought the story of the mutilated Navigator,' the man said, gazing around the crowd. 'I cannot see him here.'

'Tell me about this ship,' Boreas asked, leaning over the man. 'From which ship did this man hail?'

'It was called the *Saint Carthen*,' another of the mob leaders answered. 'A rogue trader vessel, he said. He told us that he had come from other worlds, where there was revolt, where dark powers were at work in the minds of the governors. He accused Imperial Commander Sousan, said she was under the sway of alien influence.'

'The *Saint Carthen*? You are sure that was the name of the vessel?' Boreas

demanded, gripping the front of the man's overalls and lifting him to his toes. The name had sent a shock through Boreas, as if he had been struck.

'Yes, yes, my lord,' he stuttered back, his eyes filling with fear. Boreas released him and turned away quickly, the gathered people stumbling and tripping to get out of his way. Boreas stopped after a few paces, seeing the enforcers walking cautiously forward. He turned to the crowd again.

'Subject yourselves to the judgement of the courts, and praise the Emperor that I am in a tolerant mood!' he warned them before striding off, his mind a whirlwind of dark thoughts.

Verusius stood beside Boreas's bike as the Interrogator-Chaplain walked quickly towards the gaggle of security officials,

'Many thanks for your intervention, my lord,' Verusius said with a quick bow. 'Your mercy does you credit.'

'Punish them as you see fit,' Boreas said, pushing Verusius aside and stepping over the bike. He had only a single concern now – to ascertain the truth regarding the *Saint Carthen*'s presence. If it indeed was at Piscina, it heralded far more danger than a few rioting citizens and bursts of superstitious unrest.

'Remember that the weak of mind need a strong hand to guide them,' he told Verusius sharply. 'Benevolence is to be lauded, but weakness will only allow the cancer of heresy to fester unseen. It is not my judgement to make, that is for your lawmakers, but it is my suggestion to execute the ringleaders. They have betrayed their positions of trust, and this should not be tolerated. Chastise the others quickly and then return them to work, for inactivity will breed dissent. I must also demand that you find anyone who comes from the *Saint Carthen*, and execute them immediately.'

He did not explain that if Verusius did not heed the Chaplain's suggestion, it might well be that the Dark Angels would indeed have to become executioners. The fewer who knew about the *Saint Carthen*, the less likely that its unsavoury history would be discovered. Verusius began to speak again, but the throbbing roar of the bike's engine kicking into life drowned his voice out. Boreas slewed the bike around, the back wheel spitting dust and smoke, and raced off down the street. His heart was heavy as he powered his way back to the outpost, oblivious to the wandering citizens and patrolling enforcers he scattered in his wake.

# THE TALE OF ASTELAN

## PART THREE

The room swam and spun in Astelan's vision, swirling into a vortex of grey above the slab. He had lost all concept of time, his experiences reduced to alternating periods of pain and emptiness. In some way, he had come to dread the interludes of isolation more than the torture. When Boreas was there, twisting everything he had done, turning Astelan's own words into knives to stab him with, it made it easier for him to focus. Despite the ache of his wounds and the browbeating of the Interrogator-Chaplain, Astelan could concentrate on defending himself against the accusations. He realised that he was trying to get the Dark Angels to understand why he had done the things they were calling 'crimes'. That desire to strip them of their ignorance, to get them to see the greater vision behind his deeds, was a challenge he could hold on to, a tangible goal to strive for.

But when they left him, for what seemed like days on end, it was harder to continue the fight. Points that had seemed so clear when he had explained them to Boreas became swathed in doubt.

The Chaplain's questions were etched into Astelan's mind, nagging at him, weakening his resolve. What if he had lost his way? What if he had gone insane, and everything he had done had been nothing but the vile acts of a tortured mind?

Astelan fought against these thoughts, because to pay any attention to them was to accept that everything he had done had been meaningless. And if that was true, then the greatest moment of his life, the time when he had voiced his support for Luther, was also meaningless. And if that were meaningless, Boreas was right and he had committed a grave sin.

But he had not sinned, Astelan was adamant of that in the precious moments

when he could gather his thoughts. His interrogators had not been there; they did not know what it had been like. Now was the opportunity for them to discover that uncharted part of their history, the event that so obviously marked their souls. Astelan could teach them what he knew, lead them back to the true path of the Emperor. He would cast aside their suspicions and their doctrines, and turn the interrogation to his benefit. There was much he had to say, and the Dark Angels would hear it.

And yet he had also to contest with the psyker, the warlock Samiel. The memory of the man inside him, probing his thoughts and feelings, left Astelan feeling violated. This, most of all, was the most troubling thing to him. Along with the alien, the psychic mutant was the greatest threat to mankind. The Emperor had known that, he had told them of the dangers of possession and corruption. Had he not censured the Thousand Sons for their dabbling in magic? And now, ten thousand years of misrule had left the Imperium rife with witches. Entire organisations dedicated to their recruitment and training. They were an affront to everything the Emperor had wanted to achieve. The Adeptus Astra Telepathica with their soul-binding ritual to leech away the Emperor's magnificence for themselves; the Scholastika Psykana for inducting psykers into the military. It pained Astelan to think of it, the sheer negligence of allowing humanity's inner enemy to thrive, to be nurtured at mankind's expense. Had they forgotten the perils, or did they choose simply to ignore them, risking the future of the Imperium and humanity as a whole?

And the pinnacle of folly, they had allowed psykers to become Space Marines! Librarians they called them, a comforting euphemism so that they did not have to think too deeply of the consequences. It was a mask, a smokescreen, so that those in power could pretend that there was purpose in allowing these abominations to exist. Astelan feared for the Imperium that had grown from the calamity of the Horus Heresy, and he feared for mankind's chances of survival in a galaxy determined to extinguish it.

But what could he do? As a Chapter commander he had been at the forefront of the battle to protect mankind's future. Now he was surrounded by ignorance and hate for what he represented.

But what did he truly represent? Again, Boreas's questions teased at the edges of his thoughts, unravelling the arguments he had used to justify his actions. Was he truly any different from the primarchs, who had subverted the Emperor's cause to their own? Who was he, a warrior born, to judge the fate of mankind? It was his role to follow orders, to fight battles and command men, not to set the

course of humanity's future. Was it really arrogance that had driven him to forsake Lion El'Jonson; did he really know the mind of the Emperor as well as he claimed?

'I see you have been ruminating on your life,' said Boreas. Astelan was panicked for a moment. He had not heard the Interrogator-Chaplain enter. How long had he been unaware of Boreas's presence, his attention locked inside his own head?

'I am trying to get that stinking warlock's voice out of my head, but he has poisoned me!' hissed Astelan, trying to wipe away the filth he felt on his face, but the chains were too tight and his hands waved mockingly in front of him. For a moment Astelan thought they were Samiel's hands, ready to blot out his mind again, to delve into the recesses of his memory, and he shuddered. Shaking his head, Astelan focussed on the cell and Boreas.

'You are doing well, Astelan,' the Chaplain told him. 'I see we are driving out the impurity and lies, and I hear your shouts as you cry out for forgiveness.'

'Never!' Astelan's resolve returned instantly, his mind suddenly clear again. He would never admit he had been wrong. It would be a condemnation of everything the Emperor taught, and would condone the travesty that now passed for the Imperium. 'I need no forgiveness. It is you who should beg for mercy, from the Emperor himself, for perverting his dream, his glorious ambition.'

'I have not come to listen to your ravings, I am here for information,' Boreas snapped.

'Ask what you will, I will only tell you the truth,' Astelan replied. 'Whether you welcome it, well that is something I doubt in my heart.'

'We shall see about that,' Boreas said, taking up his customary position, arms crossed, at the head of the slab. 'You claim you travelled to Tharsis on a ship, and there were other Fallen with you. Tell me how you came by this vessel and these companions.'

'First, I must tell you what befell me after the battles on Caliban,' Astelan told him. 'It was a time that began with great confusion and pain. For an eternity it felt as if I was shapeless, my form distorted and twisted inside out by seething power. I was at the centre of a storm, and part of the maelstrom itself. I had only an infinitely small awareness of myself, of who and what I was. And then I awoke, as if from a dream. It was as if Caliban, the fighting, the fire from the heavens, were all an imaginary memory at first.'

'Where? Where did you find yourself?' Boreas asked.

'That was most vexing of all,' Astelan said with a frown. He still felt dizzy and

sick from his torture at Boreas's hands and the mental probing of Samiel, and he closed his eyes to aid his concentration. 'I was on a rock-strewn slope, a barren, lifeless wasteland stretching out before me. Gone were the thick forests of Caliban, the sky was yellow overhead and a bulging star hung above the horizon. At first I thought that perhaps I had not awakened, that I was still dreaming. The impossibility of it baffled me, made me doubt my sanity. But as that sun sank out of view and the night sky filled with stars I did not recognise, I realised that it was real. Uncomprehending of how I arrived, I determined to discover what manner of place I now found myself in. It was to be a long time before I discovered the truth.'

'And the truth was?' asked Boreas.

'I was far, far from Caliban,' sighed Astelan. 'When the next morning rose, I decided to walk eastwards. There was no real purpose behind it, but part of me said that I should go towards the sun. I hoped I would find a settlement, or failing that at least some indication as to where I was. I marched the whole day, across the scree-strewn slopes of a great dormant volcano, and I found nothing.'

'How did you survive?'

'The planet was not as lifeless as I first thought. There were scattered copses of spindly trees and thorny bushes. Here, I discovered, if you dug deep enough you could find trickling streams passing through the rock, small pools under the surface. There were rodents, serpents and insects all feeding upon each other, and they were not difficult to catch. In this manner I sustained myself. I fear that if it had not been for this wondrous body the Emperor has given me, I would have perished. Had not my stomach, my muscles and my bones been so efficient, I would have starved or been cursed with disease from infected water. But we were created to survive, were we not? The Emperor moulded us so that we could eke life out of death and continue the fight.'

'But what of the ship, how did you come by it?' Boreas asked impatiently.

'I counted the days as I wandered, always heading east, always towards the morning sun,' Astelan continued purposefully, glad of the Chaplain's frustration. 'At night I would hunt, for that was when most of the creatures sallied forth from their burrows and lairs for food. For two hundred and forty-two days and nights, I existed this way before I found any sign of intelligent habitation. I spent that time trying to make sense of what had happened, reliving the battles, trying to piece together the last moments of the fighting on Caliban. To this day I cannot say, I have not found the answers.'

'What happened after two hundred and forty-two days?' There was no anger in

Boreas's voice, only a terseness born of irritation.

'I saw a light in the night sky,' Astelan said, smiling at the memory. 'At first I thought it a comet or meteor, but as I watched, it circled across the heavens to the north and then disappeared. No shooting star moves like it did and hope stirred within me again, as I realised that it was a ship or aircraft of some kind. At that point, I did not give too much thought to whether it was friend or foe, I took it simply as a sign of where to go. So for twelve more days I headed north, and on the fourth day I saw the ship leaving again and pressed towards its destination more directly.'

'And did you find where the ship had landed?'

'Like everything else on that forsaken world, humanity had chosen to live under the surface, to dig down into the rock for sanctuary,' explained Astelan. 'I saw armoured portals delved into the side of a great hill, atop which sat a great expanse lit with hundreds of lights to guide ships in. Having seen only sunlight and starlight for so long, that blaze of yellow and red was glorious in my eyes as it glowed on the horizon. I doubled my efforts, crossing the rocky plains at speed to reach the aurora of civilisation that lay ahead.'

'What then? What did you find there? Where was this place?' Boreas's questions were spat out like bolter fire.

'As I neared the end of my journey, uncertainty suddenly gripped me,' Astelan said languidly, enjoying the dissatisfaction of Boreas. 'The Imperium was being torn apart by the war unleashed by Horus. The dominions of the Emperor were divided, and I had no way of telling which side the inhabitants of that underground city belonged to. I could see no signs of war, and I spent a day watching, seeking some sign of their allegiance, but there was none.'

'But the Horus Heresy was over. For a long time the Emperor had been victorious,' Boreas pointed out.

'I had no inkling of the time that had passed, no way of knowing the great ages I had missed, or how such a thing might happen,' Astelan replied, opening his eyes and gazing at Boreas. 'In the end, I dared enter, reckoning that the risk of death at the hands of traitors was outweighed by the certain death that would eventually overtake even me in the wasteland. I presented myself at the nearest gate, a warrior of the Dark Angels. I had never seen such surprise as was written on the man's face when I appeared. But he did not try to attack me, and I realised my fears were misplaced. Overwhelmed, the guards brought me inside and called for their superiors.'

Astelan grinned, his cracked lips starting to bleed again, remembering the relief

he had felt at being welcomed into the underground settlement. It had not been until that moment that he had realised how lost he had felt, how the tumultuous events of his recent life had so disorientated him.

'They called together their ruling council,' he continued. 'There was little I could tell them, for I knew nothing of how I had got there. The priests called it a miracle, saying that the Emperor had delivered me to them. But for all of the questions they asked me, I had so many more. What news of the Heresy had they learned? Where was I, and how might I rejoin my brethren? And I learned much in that initial meeting. To my horror, I was told that over nine thousand years had swept past me. It was impossible to grasp, it was too enormous, too vast to understand. I was shocked, struck dumb as I tried to assimilate this information.'

'But you eventually came to terms with what happened, I assume,' said Boreas.

'Never fully,' admitted Astelan. 'The scope of it is beyond imagining, beyond comprehension. I rested in the chambers they led me to, incapable of rational thought as I tried to unravel what had happened, but there were no answers. Unable to rationalise what I was experiencing, I instead resolved to discover as much as I could about what had happened in my extraordinary absence. I started with the obvious and explored this new place where I found myself. It was a mining colony, on a world called Scappe Delve. They had few accurate star charts, but I was able to estimate to my consternation that I was some twelve hundred light years from Caliban. Again, the isolation and fear struck me, so far from the world I had adopted as my home, but so strange had been the other revelations, it was easier to accept this horrifying fact.'

'And so you learned of what had come to pass since you rose up against the Lion and waged war on Caliban.' Boreas's voice was steadier now. He had evidently resolved to allow Astelan to tell his tale in whatever fashion he chose.

'Facts are hard to distinguish from hearsay and fabrication in these times,' sighed Astelan. 'Nearly ten thousand years have obscured the events of the Heresy, and the histories of Scappe Delve were not extensive. But I had been there at the time the Emperor still walked among us, I could sieve the grains of truth from the legends. The chronicles told of how Horus had struck against Terra, and battle had raged inside the Imperial Palace itself. The Warmaster had unleashed the bloodthirsty World Eaters, and the Imperial Fists had held the wall against relentless assaults. But the end, the end was so confused as to be unintelligible. All that I could extract was the Emperor's victory, his personal triumph over Horus in single combat, and the great wounds he had suffered to secure his triumph. It was then that the meddling of the Ministorum became

more evident. The records spoke of the Emperor ascending to godhood from a golden throne, his magnificence spreading across the galaxy like a beacon.'

'Fanciful, to be sure, but inherently truthful,' Boreas confirmed. 'There are few who truly understand what transpired in those dark times, and even what I know, a member of the Inner Circle of the Dark Angels, is but a fraction of the whole truth.'

'It is unsurprising, when man has been taught to abhor knowledge, to venerate relics of the past over the living and the hopes of the future, and to confuse myth with reality.' It was a wonder to Astelan how much the Imperium had changed since the passing of the Emperor – a man dedicated to knowledge and understanding, of overcoming the superstition and ignorance of the Age of Strife. 'The Emperor embraced knowledge. It was this that allowed Him to create us, to know of the dire perils that awaited humanity and foresee the solution. You who have been born and raised in these unenlightened times, who became Space Marines and have fought wholly within the Imperium you know, cannot understand the way it looks to me. Your perspective is warped because you gaze at it from the outside. Even your histories have evolved over the millennia, reinterpreted, censored, rewritten so that they are worth little more than bedtime stories for children.'

'And so, with your wisdom from the ancient ages of man, you claim to know the way forward?' The scorn had returned to Boreas's voice and his face was twisted in a sneer. 'I have heard these delusions from you before, and they are no less arrogant now as when you implemented them in your tyranny over Tharsis.'

'This perspective has nothing to do with Tharsis, it goes far beyond that,' countered Astelan. 'It comes from before the Horus Heresy, back to when the change started, with the coming of the primarchs.'

'We shall deal with that later. First tell me more about your time on Scappe Delve.'

'At first it was impossible for my thoughts to encompass just how much the galaxy had changed, for it had remained the same in many ways,' Astelan said, struggling for the words to express how he felt. How could he explain what it was like to discover that the galaxy had aged ten millennia without his knowledge?

'Though no longer spearheaded by the Great Crusade of the Legions, mankind's expansion and reconquest had continued, and the Imperium now stretched beyond a million worlds.' Astelan paused, half expecting an interruption, but Boreas seemed content to let him continue without the usual

sniping remarks. ‘I had felt joy that the Emperor’s vision was still alive, until I began to read more, and spoke to the priests, the tech-adepts and the councillors. I saw the great crumbling edifice that the Imperium had become, collapsing under its own size, lost amidst its own complexity. I saw the factions, the internecine conflicts, the ebb and flow of power from individuals to faceless, unaccountable organisations. After the passing of the Emperor, even the primarchs had failed to continue the very thing they had been originally created for. And when they died or disappeared, even less remained of that core ideal of the Emperor.’

‘And so you have come to hate the Imperium you once built, jealous that the power now resides with others?’ Boreas accused him.

‘I do not hate the Imperium, I pity it,’ Astelan explained, his pointed look telling Boreas that he pitied the Chaplain almost as much. ‘The billions of adepts striving to make sense of it, their masters in their towers, to the High Lords of Terra who now claim to rule in the Emperor’s name, they cannot control what they have created. Mankind no longer has leaders, it has weak men trying desperately to cling on to what they have. Oh, there have been a few enlightened individuals like Macharius, who have relit the torch and sought to push back the darkness, but the galaxy they lived in no longer tolerates heroes. It supports mediocrity, facelessness, suppression of man’s right to endeavour to achieve glory.’

‘And yet the greatest threat to the Imperium was Horus,’ argued the Chaplain. ‘He was imbued with the powers you speak of, who had the absolute authority of the Emperor, who was trusted to lead mankind forward into a new age. When you had just a small measure of that power, it corrupted you and you turned Tharsis into a charnel house. Admit that such power is not for a single man to wield!’

‘It is the same woeful lack of courage that gripped Tharsis during the rebellion,’ rasped Astelan. ‘The fear of what might be strangles humanity, not daring to risk what they have in an effort to gain everything that it is their right to possess. Timidity and vacillation now rule the Imperium. You have become driven by a dread of the unknown, imprisoned by doubt, shackled by the desire for security and predictability. The vision has been clouded by a miasma of petty trials and tribulations.’

‘And so you determined to alter this, to reforge the Imperium into what you saw as its original purpose,’ snarled Boreas.

‘My ambitions were never that grand, for only the Emperor could achieve such

a thing,' Astelan said, shaking his head vigorously. 'But I thought I might light a signal fire, a beacon to others who strain at the bonds that keep them from the great fight, so the Imperium can become a thing of glory again, not just survival.'

'And so you had to get off Scappe Delve,' Boreas brought the questioning back to Astelan's account of events. 'There was nothing you could do on a distant mining world, no great triumphs to be had, no glorious battles to be won.'

'It was the need to know more, to find out all I could about the galaxy I now lived in, that drove me, almost consumed me,' Astelan explained. 'My existence had been turned inside out, and fate had cast me up on a dark, unknown shore. You are right, Scappe Delve became like a prison to me, confined to a narrow world of tunnels and artificial light. But the world was on the fringes of wilderness space, completely self-sufficient with its underground fungus cultivators and water recyclers, it had little contact with the rest of the Imperium. Even the ore they mined went nowhere, and they dug more and more halls and chambers just to store it. How ridiculous is that! It was a forgotten world, too unimportant, too small to warrant the attention of the wise and mighty of the Imperium.'

'But you had seen a ship before, so you knew that eventually another would come,' guessed Boreas. 'And so you waited and plotted patiently until an opportunity presented itself.'

'I indeed had to be patient,' agreed Astelan. 'For two and a half years, no ship even visited the star system. But then a vessel came. I learned that, by chance, it was the same one that had guided me to the mine all that time ago. It was called the *Saint Carthen*, captained by a merchant named Rosan Trialartes. A rogue trader, they called him, and I asked what it meant. You can imagine how I felt when they explained.'

'You saw the rogue traders as just another indication of the decline of the Space Marines,' Boreas stated flatly. 'Civilian explorers given charter to trade without restriction, to travel beyond the known borders of the Imperium to discover new worlds. I expect it vexed you greatly to know that when once it had been the Space Marine Chapters that had forged into the darkness of space, it was now the right of merchant families and dispossessed nobles.'

'Yes, it vexed me greatly, as you say, but I contained my ire,' admitted Astelan. 'The people of Scappe Delve were not responsible, they were victims. But the arrival of Trialartes was an opportunity to see what had become of the galaxy, to compare the dry words of the history scrolls with what really lay out beyond

Scappe Delve.'

'And so you left with this rogue trader, Rosan Trialartes. What happened then?' asked Boreas. 'How did you come across the other Fallen? And what took you to Tharsis?'

'I did not leave immediately, Trialartes at first objected to my presence, for no other reason than selfish fear,' Astelan said, his jaw clenching angrily with the recollection.

'I would have thought that a rogue trader would be pleased to have a Space Marine aboard his ship,' argued Boreas.

'As did I,' agreed Astelan.

'So what were his objections?' asked Boreas, his face expressionless.

'They were vague generalisations,' muttered Astelan. 'He called it an affront to his Warrant of Trade, claiming that my presence would limit the freedoms his charter as a rogue trader gave him. He called me a symbol of the authority that he was free from. However, the council of Scappe Delve argued in my favour, and eventually he relented and agreed to take me aboard. I think that the people of the mine were pleased to see me leave, for some unknown reason my being there caused them unfounded anxiety.'

'It is common enough,' said Boreas. 'For most of humanity, we Space Marines are a distant power, aloof defenders from history and legend. It is not surprising that sometimes they are perturbed to find out that we really exist and can still walk amongst them.'

'Trialartes's hesitation was far more understandable, as I discovered,' Astelan said with an abrupt, bitter laugh. 'We travelled from Scappe Delve to Orionis to offload the ore he had taken from the miners, in exchange for lasguns and power packs. But my suspicions were aroused. The exchange took place in the outer reaches of the system. No contact was made with the inhabited world there, and he made no attempt to dock with the orbital station.'

'He was a smuggler?' asked Boreas.

'It was unjust to use such a term for a rogue trader, he told me,' Astelan answered after a moment's thought. He was ashamed of what he had allowed the rogue trader to do without retribution. 'As he explained it to me, someone had to ship armaments from system to system. His conduct worried me, but I was unfamiliar with the customs and ways of this changed Imperium, and I felt an odd naïveté in my dealings with Trialartes, for he knew so much more about the galaxy than I did. So, in my ignorance, I did nothing and let the matter pass.'

'But what of the other Fallen?' Boreas's insistence had returned. 'Where did

you meet them?'

'You wish to hear what befell me, then let me tell you in my own way!' snapped Astelan.

'I do not care for your endless tales, I am here to make you face your sinful actions and repent,' Boreas snarled back. 'Your dealings with the other Fallen, what of them?'

The two of them fell silent, their stares locked on each other as they both tried to exert their will. For several minutes, the only sound was their heavy breathing and the odd hiss or crackle from the brazier.

'I met them at a place that Trialartes jokingly referred to as Port Imperial,' Astelan said eventually. 'I had urged him to take me back to Caliban, so that I might rejoin my brethren, but he confessed ignorance of its location. I found this unbelievable, that the home of the first Legion should have fallen into obscurity. I showed him where it was on the charts and he vehemently denied that there was an inhabited world there. I demanded that he take me there, but he refused. In the end, I was forced to abandon the idea. We made several more journeys, travelling from system to system, unloading the arms in one place and taking on board plasma chambers, which we took somewhere else, and so it continued for many months. But none of the worlds we visited held what I sought. Trialartes plied his trade on the edges of the Imperium, travelling between the distant worlds on the borders of wilderness space. When I spoke to him of my desire to discover more, to go to a world with repositories of knowledge that I could study, he suggested I might find a more willing captain at Port Imperial. It was there that I met the other dispossessed brethren.'

'And where is this place?' demanded Boreas.

'Save yourself the labour of seeking it out, interrogator,' laughed Astelan. 'It does not exist any more.'

'You are lying!' roared Boreas, grabbing Astelan by the chin and thrusting his head back against the interrogation table.

'I have no need to lie,' spat Astelan between gritted teeth. 'Do you think I would seek to protect those renegades and outcasts who lived there? Do you think I hide my brethren from your attentions? No, I tell you the truth, Port Imperial is no more. I should know, I destroyed it.'

'More destruction to sate your appetite for carnage?' snarled Boreas.

'Certainly not!' Astelan wrenched his face from Boreas's grip, and the Chaplain stepped back. 'Port Imperial was a den of smugglers, pirates and heretics. I was horrified to find two Dark Angels there. Port Imperial was once an orbital dock

and shipyard. The wondrous scribes of the Administratum had forgotten its existence over the centuries, after it had been abandoned after some ancient war. Once used as a staging post for Imperial fleets, it had been deserted for several centuries until the raiders moved in. On one of those ships, over one hundred years before my coming, had been Brothers Methelas and Anovel.'

'You knew them?' Boreas's voice betrayed his surprise.

'Not in the slightest,' Astelan replied with a dismissive shake of his head. 'They were not from my Chapter. They were not even from the old Legion, they were sons of Caliban. But they recognised me at once. At first they acted as if the Emperor himself had arrived, but I soon stopped their undignified behaviour.'

'Explain yourself,' Boreas snapped.

'They could not decide whether to be afraid or to rejoice,' Astelan told him. 'They had become undisciplined, they had lost their way. Oh, they had soon risen to control Port Imperial, none dared stand against them, but they were without purpose or resolve. Truly you might describe them as Fallen, for they had set themselves up as lords over pirates and scum.'

'Whereas you had greater ambitions, to set yourself up as a lord over a whole world of hundreds of millions of souls.'

'Still you persist with this innuendo and accusations, despite all that I have told you,' lamented Astelan. 'I find your fear of the truth utterly remarkable and inexcusable.'

'So what led to the destruction of the space station?' This time it was Boreas who ignored the jibe.

'With my coming, I took command, and they obeyed me without question,' Astelan said with pride. 'While they had been content to exist, to survive at the edge of civilisation, I told them what I had learned, of what I now dreamed I might achieve. It was not long before they shared my vision, for a return to an age of greatness. My vision inspired them, and together we devised a way for us to take a step closer towards that magnificent goal. For a start, we needed a ship. The *Saint Carthen* was the largest and best ship we could commandeer, but Trialartes turned down our offers. He resorted to violence to try to force us from his ship. It was a grave mistake on his part.'

'You killed him and took his ship?' Boreas was incredulous.

'A brutal but basically accurate summary of events,' admitted Astelan. 'Some of the crew took stand against us, and doomed themselves with their resistance. Some of the other ships' captains there also made the mistake of opposing us, and it was at that point we realised the shortcomings of our newly gained

command. She lacked all but the most minimal weaponry, she had a few batteries of lasers to defend herself, but insufficient for the type of vessel we would need if we were to launch a new crusade. We boarded one of the other ships and offered her crew the same choice we had offered Trialartes. Foolishly, the captain could not see the sense of our offer and refused to support us. Again we were forced to fight, and had to kill all but a few of the crew before the others acquiesced to our needs. Once we had demonstrated our strength, there was no further resistance.'

'And so now you ruled a fleet of raiders and smugglers,' Boreas continued scornfully. 'It must have been hard for you, once a lauded Chapter commander, to be reduced to a pirate prince.'

'I had no intention of leading such a collection of scum,' snorted Astelan. 'We spent months refitting the *Saint Carthen* to be more worthy of her role, taking weapons from the other vessels so that she was fit for command. The crews of the other ships co-operated out of fear, nothing more.'

'And so what did you plan to do with this warship you had created?' Boreas asked. 'Did you think you could single-handedly continue the Great Crusade?'

'It should never have ended!' Astelan rasped. 'The treachery of Horus was a great setback, but catastrophe had been averted, and it was the failure of the primarchs and humanity's leaders to launch mankind back into the stars. But I see that my arguments still fall on deaf ears.'

'You have no arguments, only delusional ravings,' said Boreas, turning away again as if to ignore his prisoner's words.

'My delusions, if that is what you wish to call them, are more powerful than anything else in the Imperium,' Astelan told the Chaplain's broad back. 'Can you not imagine what might be achieved if humanity were truly united again? There is not a force amongst the stars that could resist us!'

'United behind you, I suppose,' said Boreas, looking back at Astelan. 'You would set yourself up as a new Emperor and lead us into this fantastical golden age you dream of.'

'You do not comprehend the vileness of your accusations.' Astelan longed to be free of his chains, which were weighing ever more heavily on his tired body. 'I could never rival the Emperor, nobody can. Even Horus, favoured amongst the primarchs, could not match his greatness. No, it is not I alone that should lead mankind, it should be all Space Marines. They have taken away your true purpose, turned you into their slaves.'

'We exist to protect mankind, not to rule it!' Boreas turned on his heel and

pointed an accusing finger at Astelan. ‘Admit the heresies of what you preach! Accept that when you turned on Caliban, you broke every oath you had sworn, neglected every duty that was yours.’

‘It was not we who were the oath-breakers!’ protested Astelan.

‘You abandoned everything for your own ambitions, from Caliban through to your reign on Tharsis!’ Boreas’s voice rose to a roar as he strode across the cell.

‘That cannot be so, for I knew nothing of Tharsis when we set out from Port Imperial,’ argued Astelan, managing to calm his voice.

‘So what did you intend to do?’ asked Boreas. ‘Travel to Terra perhaps? Take your arguments to the Senatorum Imperialis so that the High Lords could see your great vision?’

‘The High Lords are less than nothing to me.’ Astelan would have spat if his mouth had not been so dry. ‘They are puppets who pretend to hold power. No, it is the people of the Imperium, the untold billions who hold the key to mankind’s destiny. The Imperium has grown stagnant, complacent over the centuries and millennia, with those holding the reins of power merely content to continue to rule. It is from those who toil every day, who fight aboard the starships and sacrifice their lives for the Emperor on distant battlefields, who will drive mankind forward into an age of supremacy.’

‘And how did you think you could bring this about, with your crude warship and piratical crew?’ Boreas asked, now composed again.

‘To lead by example!’ exclaimed Astelan, leaning towards the Chaplain, trying to urge him to understand. ‘We turned our guns on the other ships, obliterated Port Imperial and chased down those who tried to flee. It was those raiders, those rene-gades, who were almost as guilty as the cowardly note-takers who hold power. They were parasites, feeding off the rotting carcass of the Imperium, draining it of its strength. How many ships are wasted chasing corsairs when they could be pushing back the boundaries of the Emperor’s realm? How many lives are lost fighting these leeches – lives that could be spent exterminating aliens and settling new worlds to build our strength? Just as the Imperium has spiralled into decline, so too can one great act be a catalyst that can see the Emperor’s vision complete. A world won is a world that can contribute to the greater cause. From that world, another can be rediscovered or conquered, and from that another and another. That is the Great Crusade: it is not about battles and war, it is about domination for mankind.’

‘I still fail to see how you and a single ship could bring this about,’ Boreas argued.

‘The *Saint Carthen* was merely a means to an end, to take me to where I could enact my plans,’ Astelan explained. ‘As you have already learnt, I achieved that end on Tharsis until you destroyed my great army, blindfolded by those weaker than yourselves.’

‘But you said you knew nothing of Tharsis. You must have had some plan, some objective in mind,’ insisted Boreas.

‘At first my goals were nebulous and unfocussed,’ Astelan explained slowly. ‘I learnt much from Anovel and Methelas. They told me of how the Legions had been broken down into Chapters following the Horus Heresy. Of how aliens continued to run rampant, and traitors rebelled against the Emperor unchecked. The plan, the return to the Great Crusade, was growing inside me, fuelling me. It did not reach such depth and scope until Tharsis, but it was subconsciously pushing me onwards. The star maps of Trialartes were woefully inadequate, and with no Navigator to pilot the ship any distance through the warp, we edged our way back into more populated star systems.

‘It was then that the greatest tragedy of Horus’s treachery was revealed to me. With their everlasting war against the Emperor, the traitors have sullied the name of the Space Marines. As you said, others do not understand us, and when we encountered Imperial vessels, they took us to be renegades. They fled or attacked. Some we had to destroy to protect ourselves, salvaging what we could from the wreckage. We encountered resistance from the worlds we visited, and they drove us away. A ship cannot survive without supplies, and so eventually we had to take what we needed from other vessels, from outposts.’

‘Piracy,’ Boreas stated flatly. ‘Your conscience reveals you as a pirate. The armour you wear, the cause you believe in, does not alter that. You had become the very thing you say you despised so much.’

‘Is it piracy that you wield bolters from another world?’ asked Astelan. ‘Are you pirates because the food that sustains you is taken from others?’

‘A poor comparison, for we are supplied by ancient treaties,’ Boreas replied with a derisive shake of his head. ‘As we fulfil our duty to protect mankind, so mankind has a duty to feed and arm us. There is no threat involved, no violence.’

‘No threat, you say,’ Astelan continued. ‘What about the threat of angering the Dark Angels? What about the fear of retribution should your suppliers break their treaties? It is only different because you claim it is justifiable. What was I to do? My needs were no less legitimate, my goals no less worthy. But the impenetrable mass that the Imperium has become had no place for me. We did not fit into the warped scheme and so we were forced to take other measures.’

‘And your brethren, Methelas and Anovel, what of them?’ Boreas demanded.

‘They never fully understood what it is that drives me,’ Astelan told him. ‘How could they, they were not old Legion? Yes, they had supported Luther, but I discovered that they were still driven by pettiness. I do not think they truly believed in my plans for the Greater Imperium. They sought merely to strike at those whom they believed had cast them out. It was vengeance they sought, not a higher purpose. When we finally came upon Tharsis they would not accompany me, and we parted company there.’

‘They abandoned you,’ Boreas suggested shrewdly.

‘I do not know what their motives were, but they left without me,’ Astelan confirmed.

‘So just how did your rebuilding of the Imperium lead you to a world torn apart by civil war?’ Boreas asked.

‘Our ship was damaged, we sought a haven, but by chance we arrived in the Tharsis system first and my life was changed forever,’ explained Astelan.

‘How had your ship come to be damaged?’ Boreas’s tone was quiet, almost nonchalant, as if he was merely observing Astelan and had no genuine interest in his answers.

‘We had been falsely marked as renegades and were hunted and hounded,’ Astelan related the grim memories. ‘The situation had become intolerable, my dreams were almost shattered. Circumstance had turned against me, engineered by those who did not want the servants of the Emperor to hear my message, for it threatened everything they had taught for ten thousand years. A fleet was despatched to destroy us, and we were almost caught at Giasameth. We had to flee, something I had never before done in my life.’

‘So it is cowardice that has driven you for all these years?’ Boreas asked sharply. ‘Do you now accept that it was your fear of duty, your dread of the burden laid upon you, that caused you to turn upon your masters?’

‘No, it was not as a coward that I fled, it was with the growing knowledge that my message, my vision, was crucial,’ Astelan answered emphatically. ‘It was more important than me, and I would willingly lay down my life if another was to continue the quest, but I found none that could do so. The trials of that time only strengthened my resolve to succeed. It reinforced my belief that the Imperium has become infested with corruption and self-servitude. They erect fanciful statues of the Emperor across the galaxy, pay homage to Him and plead for Him to answer their prayers, without any consideration of what the Emperor truly represents.’

‘And what do you consider that to be?’ Boreas was getting angrier and began pacing to and fro in front of the shelves of torture implements.

‘Humanity, Boreas, He represents humanity,’ Astelan said slowly, as if instructing a slow-witted child. ‘Something that you or I could never do, for it has been a long time since either of us could consider ourselves normal humans. In creating the Space Marines He took mankind back to the stars. You still accuse me of selfish ambition, but you have not been listening to what I have said. It was not for my benefit alone that I fought in the bloody campaigns of the Great Crusade. It was not purely for myself that I waged war on dozens of worlds. The truth is, we did not create the Imperium for ourselves, we created it for those who were unable to. It was not for the Adeptus Terra, the tech-priests, the Ministorum, or the merchant houses, it was for all of mankind. You must surely understand that the Imperium as it is now is not humanity, it has become simply a means to sustain itself.’

‘I swore to protect the realm of the Emperor and defend mankind,’ insisted Boreas.

‘And I swore that same oath!’ Astelan reminded him vehemently.

‘You broke that oath when you betrayed the Lion!’ bellowed Boreas, storming towards Astelan.

‘And I tell you that it was not we who committed the first treachery!’ Astelan was getting sick of protesting his innocence. ‘It was the primarchs, your thrice-accursed Lion amongst them!’

‘Your heresies are without limit!’ Boreas roared, smashing a fist across Astelan’s face, rupturing his puffy lips and spilling thick blood onto the slab. ‘I see that you have not progressed at all. You are no closer to admitting your sins than before. Your deep-rooted hatred has tainted everything inside you, and you are blind to it. If you choose not to see it for yourself, then we will open your eyes for you.’

‘No! You are not listening!’ Astelan warned, ignoring the pain in his mouth and the taste of his own blood. ‘Please, heed my words! Do not give in to the darkness they have wrapped around you. You can still be victorious, you can triumph over those who seek to destroy you.’ Astelan’s hands were outstretched towards the Interrogator-Chaplain as far as the chains would allow, and Boreas slapped them away.

‘You and the other traitors destroyed us the moment you chose to side with Luther the Betrayer,’ Boreas snarled. ‘I see that there is yet more work for Brother Samiel.’

‘Keep that warlock away from me!’ Astelan could not keep the desperation from his voice. He had never been afraid in his life, but the thought of the witch’s return filled him with unnatural dread. ‘Keep him out of my head, his corruption is still inside me, I can feel it seeping into my soul.’

‘Then repent your sins!’ Boreas’s voice dropped to a subtle whisper. ‘It is an easy thing to save your soul. Just admit your sins, recant your heresies and it will end painlessly. You do not even have to speak, just nod your head.’

Astelan slumped back, his chains rattling and closed his eyes tightly. Sweat ran off him in rivulets that collected on the slab, and many of his wounds had reopened with his exertions, staining his body with blood.

‘I do not acknowledge your right to judge me,’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘I do not accept your authority.’

‘Then you leave me no other choice,’ Boreas told him, striding to the cell door and wrenching it open.

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## PART THREE

‘They left no journey plans?’ Boreas asked over the comm. He was standing on the bridge of the Dark Angels’ ship, the *Blade of Caliban*, in orbit over Piscina IV. He had contacted the rapid strike vessel to prepare to seize the rogue trader’s ship as he had ridden back to the keep, but it had left orbit. Now he and the other Space Marines were on board the *Blade of Caliban* to lead the search for the missing starship. Before they had left he had sent a coded astropathic message to the Tower of Angels telling of the presence of the Fallen at Piscina. It would be at least a dozen days before they received the message, and the same time again for a reply to return, and he hoped to be back on Piscina IV to receive it. But rather than wait idly for instructions, Boreas had decided to set off after the *Saint Carthen* in case the opportunity faded and the Fallen slipped away from his grasp.

‘Intrasystem craft have already patrolled the designated exit passage, with no sign of the *Saint Carthen*, Lord Boreas,’ replied Commodore Kayle, head of the Piscina system defence ships. He had already pledged to assist Boreas in his pursuit of the suspicious ship, and was now directing the operation from the orbital docking station. ‘I have four vessels quartering the outer reaches, two more in the biosphere and another headed to the inner system.’

‘We shall also direct our ship to the core planets,’ Boreas told him. ‘It is possible they are aware they are being looked for. If they try to reach safe distance to jump into the warp, they know they will be detected.’

‘Very well, Lord Boreas,’ agreed Kayle. ‘The inbound vessel is called the *Thor Fifteen*, under Captain Stehr. I shall inform him that you will be close to his position within a few days.’

‘My thanks for your co-operation in this matter,’ Boreas said. ‘Please remind

your captains that I merely wish them to locate the vessel. Under no circumstances is it to be boarded. If necessary, your ships may fire to cripple its progress but no other contact is to be made.'

'Your message has been passed on, Lord Boreas, though I do not fully understand such caution,' Kayle replied. 'My men are fully capable of dealing with pirates of this kind.'

'If we are just facing pirates, I shall be pleased, and my caution shall be proven unfounded,' Boreas told him. 'However, I fear a much worse enemy awaits anyone who attempts to board that ship. No one, absolutely no one, is to have any contact with members of the *Saint Carthen*'s crew.'

'As you wish, Lord Boreas,' Kayle said. 'I will inform you if we make any contact, and I trust you will also keep me informed of any developments on your part.'

Kayle broke the contact and the comm buzzed for a moment until Boreas switched it off. He stood there for a moment glaring at the wide viewscreens that covered much of the bridge's dim interior, amongst the many dial-filled walls of readouts, gauges, speakers, display plates and monitoring positions. He silently willed the *Saint Carthen* to show herself on one of those screens, but he knew the search would not be so swift or so simple.

Like the keep on the planet below, the ship was staffed mainly with non-Space Marine serfs, mechanical servitors and a few tech-priests. He turned to Sen Neziel, the most senior of the ship's officers who served as captain when there were no Dark Angels aboard. He wore a simple robe of deep green over a black bodysuit, his thin face crossed with childhood scars suffered during his examination by the Apothecaries.

'Plot a course for the inner system, passing Piscina III inbound,' he told the man. 'I want the augurs to be fully manned at every minute. We must find the *Saint Carthen* before anyone else encounters it.'

'Very well, Interrogator-Chaplain, we shall proceed at full speed to Piscina III,' Neziel confirmed. 'I estimate our time to orbit at three and a half solar days.'

'Good, Neziel, good,' Boreas said absently before turning and striding out of the bridge. He made his way to the ascensor to take him down three levels to the Space Marine quarters. Here the others were waiting for him to give them a briefing. As he waited for the ascensor to clank and rattle its way up the shaft, he pondered exactly what he would tell them. None of them were members of the Deathwing, so they had not been made privy to the existence of the Fallen. In fact, they had only been given the scantest information, wreathed in legends and

myths, concerning the whole of the Horus Heresy.

Boreas had taken sacred vows never to divulge his knowledge of those turbulent times, for it was only upon admission to the Deathwing that the first layer of the half-truths were peeled away. He agreed completely with the traditional secrecy of the Chapter. If it were common knowledge that the Dark Angels had once teetered on the brink of treason, then the Chapter itself would be doomed. None outside the Inner Circle knew the full truth, except perhaps a few of the Imperium's inquisitors who suspected much but could prove nothing. As an Interrogator-Chaplain, Boreas was a member of the third level of the Inner Circle, which itself was the seventh level of secrets within the elite Deathwing. He knew much about the treachery of the Primarch Horus, of how the Lutherites had sided against the Emperor, and the Dark Angels had quested for ten millennia to atone for their near-treason. But he had learnt much more in the interrogation cell with Astelan. Much, much more. Boreas had not believed it at the time, merely dismissing it as propaganda and blinded judgement, but over the last years, in particular the last few months, the Fallen's arguments had seemed to gather greater weight in his mind.

With a loud grinding, the ascensor arrived. The doors opened with a wisp of escaping steam and Boreas stepped inside. As they slid shut, he jabbed at the rune for the Space Marines' berths. It rattled slowly downwards, giving him more time to ponder what he would tell the others. When the ascensor arrived, he stepped out onto the metal decking and took a deep breath. Instead of going straight to the briefing chamber, he instead turned right and walked the short distance to the ship's chapel. It was sparsely decorated, with a simple embossed relief of the Chapter symbol and a small altar on which stood a golden cup and a ewer of red wine. Filling the cup, he knelt and bowed his head. He took a long draught of the wine, placed the cup beside himself on the floor, and clasped his hands to his chest.

'We live in a galaxy of darkness,' he whispered, his throat dry. 'The ancient enemies of the Chapter surround us. The alien surges forth from its hiding place. The heretic rises up within the domain of the Emperor. I fear that the vilest of evils stirs once more. The corrupt, the renegade, the traitor sworn to the Dark Powers reach out their claws to destroy what we have built. I have laboured to shield the galaxy from these woes, and to protect my warriors from the perverting truth of the universe in which we live. Now I risk my honour. I must break my oath of secrecy to fulfil the greater oath I swore to protect the Emperor and his subjects.

‘Look kindly on me from beyond the veil, great Lion, mightiest warlord of Caliban. I ask for your wisdom that it may guide my words and my deeds from your place beside the Emperor. I ask you to give me the strength to root out this cancerous treachery. I ask your forgiveness for what I must do to protect your name and the honour of what you created. Though my oath as a warrior of the Deathwing will be annulled, I now swear a new oath to you that I will stop at nothing to expunge this darkness. I shall let no obstacle stand between me and protecting that which is most dear to me. Give us your blessing in this endeavour and we shall strive to serve you. Grant us victory in this crusade of ours.’

Standing, Boreas bent down and lifted the goblet to his lips again, draining the last of the wine. Placing it back on the altar, he turned and left, striding purposefully into the briefing room. His moment of reflection and prayer had reinforced his belief in what he had to do. Feeling fortified and ready, he looked at the others seated on the foremost of the ten rows of benches stretched across the room. A pulpit shaped into a stylised two-headed eagle spreading its wings faced the auditorium, and Boreas stepped up behind the lectern, his hands clasped behind his back.

‘My brothers,’ he began, looking at their intent faces. ‘In these last few years, we have been called upon only briefly to do what it is that we were created for. Skirmishes, cleanses, patrols; these have been the closest we have come to the battles we were bred and raised for. But now that time of waiting has come to an end. Now those years of dormancy are over and it is time to unleash the Lion’s angels of death, it is time for the fury of the Dark Angels to be known again! A foe is close by, in this very star system that we guard. They are the worst enemy we can ever face, and we must exact terrible retribution for their heinous crimes. Those crimes are made all the worse for they were perpetrated against everything we hold in our hearts. They are against the Emperor himself, they are against our primarch, Lion El’Jonson, and they are against the whole of our Chapter.’

Boreas paused, realising that he was now fiercely gripping the lectern, the metal of the eagle slowly buckling under the pressure of his fingers. The others were staring at his hands as well, alarm on their faces. Let them see my anger, Boreas told himself, keeping his grip strong. Let my example teach them the true meaning of a hated foe.

‘There is something I must tell you all,’ Boreas continued, meeting each of their gazes in turn. Zaul’s eyes were narrowed, his mouth pinched with apprehension. Damas met the Interrogator-Chaplain’s stare with equal intensity. Thumiel

rubbed at his chin, looking thoughtful. Hephaestus crossed his arms, waiting patiently for Boreas to continue with his speech. Boreas looked last at Nestor. The Apothecary looked relaxed, his gaze alternating between Boreas and the others, his hands neatly clasped in his lap.

A sudden moment of hesitation gripped Boreas as they looked expectantly at him. As far as he knew, what he was about to do was unprecedented in the Chapter's history. It could be viewed as a terrible abuse of his position. Was he about to exceed his authority, he wondered? Could he really make such a decision on his own, with no guidance from his superiors? He had no other choice, he resolved. It would take weeks for a message to be sent to the Tower of Angels and a reply to return, by which time whatever trail the *Saint Carthen* had left could have disappeared altogether. The threat of the Fallen, he decided, not only outweighed the import of what he was about to tell his brethren, but also the personal consequences for him.

'When you became Space Marines, you were taught many things,' Boreas began. 'Most importantly, you learnt of the great history of the Dark Angels, and of the founding of the Imperium of Mankind. Ten thousand years ago, darkness shrouded the galaxy, humanity was scattered across the stars. They were isolated, preyed upon by aliens, riven with discord. But then the Emperor revealed himself and brought about the end of the Age of Strife, and thus began this golden age of the Imperium. He gave birth to us, his Space Marines. We reconquered the galaxy in his name. We brought war to a thousand foes, we liberated humanity from the grip of evil. The Emperor created us as perfect warriors, and none could stand before us. We ourselves, the Dark Angels, were the first Legion, at the forefront of the Great Crusade. Lion El'Jonson, our true father and our primarch, led us to victory after victory and the name of the Dark Angels was renowned across the stars. The Emperor himself praised our bravery, our tenacity and our ferocity.'

Boreas could see the pride in the eyes of his assembled command. They had heard the grand tales, they knew the legends and could picture those glorious days as if they were there. The blood of the Lion pumped through their veins, the latest of ten thousand years of superhuman knights dedicated to the Emperor.

'But there was a darkness festering at the heart of what we built.' Boreas's voice dropped from a near-roar to a hushed whisper that would have been nearly inaudible to a normal human. 'You were told of how the weak amongst the Legions were corrupted. Of how the serpent Horus turned them from the path of glory laid down by the Emperor. They rose up and struck at the man who had

created them, in an act of treachery so base it had never before been known or since repeated. Battle-brother fought against battle-brother and the Imperium wept at the destruction heaped upon it. But we triumphed over the darkness. The Emperor sacrificed himself to destroy Horus, his body crippled almost to death so that now he only can watch us through the strength of his mind and soul. They brought the Imperium to its knees, they shattered the empire that we had built and nearly took the Emperor from us. But we did not surrender, we prevailed. From the golden throne that sustains him, the Emperor has guided us for ten long millennia and we have striven to rebuild that which was almost torn asunder.'

Now the pride had gone, and hatred burned in the eyes of the Dark Angels listening intently to Boreas's words. For their whole lives they had been taught about the renegades who had followed Warmaster Horus and plunged the Imperium into catastrophic civil war. They had been taught that there was no foe to be more loathed, no enemy more deserving of death than the Traitor Marines. It was they who had turned to the Dark Gods and even now sallied forth from their lairs to bring misery and devastation.

The Dark Angels were ready for what Boreas had to tell them.

'But there is an even darker tale you must now hear.' Boreas paused again and took another deep breath. This was the point of no return. What he was about to say would change them forever. 'You have been told the names of these traitors, the Legions who we hate and shall hunt whilst even one of them still draws breath: The Emperor's Children, the Thousand Sons, the World Eaters, the Alpha Legion, the Word Bearers, the Iron Warriors, the Death Guard, the Night Lords and the Sons of Horus; you remember these names with fury. But there is a Legion whose name is not recorded on that roll of abhorrence. It is the name of the Dark Angels.'

The others sat in shock; Boreas could see the confusion written on their faces. He knew well the thoughts and emotions that now swirled through their minds. The sudden emptiness, the doubt, the denial. It was Damas who spoke first.

'I do not understand, Brother-Chaplain,' the veteran sergeant said, his brow creased with thought. 'How can our Chapter be counted amongst the traitors?'

'I am as loyal to the Emperor as the Lion himself!' Zaul exclaimed, standing quickly, his fist clenched to his chest.

'We are all loyal warriors,' agreed Hephaestus. 'How can you accuse us of such a thing?'

'Your purity and loyalty is beyond question,' Boreas told them, stepping down

from the pulpit to stand in front of them. ‘But the seed of heresy resides within us all.’

‘Is this a test?’ Thumiel asked, looking at the others. ‘It is a test, isn’t it?’

‘Our lives are a constant test, Brother Thumiel,’ Nestor said calmly. ‘I do not think that is the intention of the Interrogator-Chaplain.’

‘Listen!’ hissed Boreas, waving Zaul to seat himself. The Space Marine returned to the bench reluctantly, eying Boreas suspiciously. ‘Listen, and you shall gain wisdom and knowledge. Why do you think it was that the Dark Angels did not fight at the battle of Terra? Why did we not stand at the walls of the Imperial Palace beside the Imperial Fists and the White Scars?’

‘We were delayed fighting the forces of the Warmaster,’ Hephaestus answered. ‘We arrived after the battle was won. Or are you saying this is another lie?’

‘It is not a lie, but a half-truth,’ Boreas replied. ‘We indeed fought those who had turned against the Emperor. We fought against our own battle-brothers who had sided against him. When the Lion returned to Caliban, it was his own Space Marines that attacked him.’

‘But that does not make sense,’ protested Zaul. ‘We were the oldest and greatest of the Legions, why would any of us bow to Horus?’

‘Who can say what went on in the depraved minds of those who turned upon their battle-brothers?’ That was an outright lie, for Boreas knew full well what had turned the Dark Angels upon themselves. He had heard it from Astelan. But understanding was not required here, merely obedience. ‘They were corrupted by a man possessed of a great skill with words, whose bitterness he hid behind a falsehood of friendship with the Lion. It was El’Jonson’s own adopted kin who turned on him, Luther the Betrayer.’

‘Luther was like a father to the Lion,’ snorted Damas. ‘How could our legends not mention such a grievous act?’

‘Because we expunged them,’ Boreas replied brutally. ‘Because the truth is too dangerous to be left unfettered. Because the knowledge of it is a corruption in and of itself. Because you, my battle-brothers, must think with purity and clarity, and the times of the Horus Heresy are filled with doubt and ambiguity.’

‘You lied to us, treated us like children.’ Thumiel clutched his head in his hands, his gaze at the ground. ‘You doubted us and kept this from us. ’

‘No!’ snapped Boreas. ‘It is because this legacy of shame was not yours to bear. Knowledge is a dangerous thing. It clouds the mind, it breeds laxity and heresy. Only the strongest-willed, only the most devout and pure can understand the guilt that lies upon us for this heinous deed at the time of our greatest glory. Only

those with the courage to face the darkness within our own souls can strive to restore honour to our Chapter. I believe you are ready for that fight, and I tell you this not to cause you harm, but to give you the strength to prosecute your duties with zeal and vigour.'

'And why now, Interrogator-Chaplain, do you decide to reveal this information?' Nestor asked quietly. The others looked at him sharply and then turned their attention to Boreas, nodding in assent.

'Because the opportunity for our redemption is at hand!' Boreas declared, starting to pace up and down in front of them. 'This is the vile foe of which I speak. The Lutherites, the Fallen Angels, may be here, in the Piscina system itself.'

'The renegades are here?' gasped Zaul. 'How can you know that? How can we trust anything you say?'

'For centuries you have all trusted in the Chapter, heeded the words of myself and the other Chaplains,' Boreas pointed out. 'We never lied to you, not directly. We sought to protect you, guard you against the stain of our history. It has been this way for ten thousand years. Do you not think I felt this way when I learnt the truth? Do you think I took my vows of secrecy light of heart, gleeful of what I then knew, and what you now know? I asked myself the same questions that now plague your thoughts. I sought meaning in the anarchy of my mind. And I found it, through my brethren, as you shall find it through me. This is your greatest test as Dark Angels. But it is not a test that you can pass or fail, there are no set standards. It is a test for you to judge in your own hearts how you deal with the truth. The truth is hard to bear, and now you are amongst those who must share that burden. You must walk amongst your battle-brothers knowing that which drives us while they do not. That is what it means to be Deathwing.'

'The Deathwing?' Hephaestus asked. 'What connection do the Deathwing have with the Fallen?'

'All those who are or have been in the Deathwing know what you have been told,' Boreas explained. 'You are all now, by the very fact of what you know, warriors of the Deathwing. They are one and same, the honour of the Chapter and the shame of our past shared in a single soul.'

'I'm now in the Deathwing?' laughed Thumiel. 'Just like that, I become a member of the First Company, the elite of the Chapter?'

'There are ceremonies, there are oaths to swear, and your armour to be painted,' Boreas said, stopping in front of the battle-brother, laying a hand on his head. 'But yes, you are now Deathwing, there is no other way. An ordinary battle-

brother cannot know what you have been told, and so I shall induct you into the Deathwing, and instruct you in the secret knowledge of our Chapter.'

'I ask this again, Interrogator-Chaplain, why now?' Nestor asked.

'The Fallen are in Piscina!' Boreas repeated. 'We hunt their ship as I speak. I declare crusade on this mission, this is a holy war against the most ancient enemy of our Chapter. We shall go from here and prepare for battle. We shall not rest, we shall don our armour and our weapons and they shall not be laid down until the enemy is destroyed. This is a reckoning that has waited a hundred centuries, and our vengeance is at hand. You see, this is the true purpose of the Dark Angels. This is the real mission of the Chapter. Whilst a Fallen still lives unrepentant of his sins, we can gain no true honour, we cannot truly serve the Emperor as his greatest warriors. All else we might do is ultimately in vain, but the hunt, the quest, these are what give us our meaning. Only when we have healed the grievous wounds of the Horus Heresy can we start to build again.'

'I feel the pain burning inside me!' Zaul declared, slapping a hand to his chest. His eyes were wide, his muscles taut. He fell to his knees at Boreas's feet. 'I understand, Interrogator-Chaplain! Forgive my doubts! Thank you for opening my eyes to this mystery. Thank you for giving my life purpose. I swear that I will follow you into the Eye of Terror itself to expunge this deed from our past.'

The others followed his lead, kneeling before the Interrogator-Chaplain. Nestor hesitated for a moment, glancing at the others, and then knelt at the end of the line. Pride swelled within Boreas's heart as he walked down the line, touching each of them on the scalp. His doubts seemed to dissipate like a mist as he looked at the row of kneeling warriors. Zaul was right. Here was purpose. Here was what he had been seeking these last two years. They were ready to fight to eradicate the shame of the Chapter.

Boreas was ready to fight, to eradicate the memory of Astelan and his own personal shame.

For the next few days, as the *Blade of Caliban* prowled into the inner Piscina system, the Dark Angels prepared themselves. They were not just preparing for war; they were readying themselves for a crusade, the most sacred undertaking a Space Marine could make. It was not just a mission, it was a sacred oath they had sworn, and they would not rest until it was complete or they were dead. It was more than a simple quest, it was a state of mind that the Space Marines entered, foregoing all other considerations in pursuit of their goal.

During a crusade, they did not rest or sleep, spending only an hour each day in

the semi-conscious meditative state allowed by the catalepsean node implant. They spent the remainder of their time readying their battlegear and in prayer. Now that Boreas had made them members of the Deathwing, they repainted their armour in the bone-white colour of the Dark Angels First Company, and applied new markings. They were now entitled to personal heraldry, and spent hours with Boreas and the old texts he possessed, researching their crests and colours according to Chapter tradition. The Interrogator-Chaplain taught them new battle hymns – the secret Catechism of Hate reserved for the Fallen, the Opus Victorius in honour of the loyal Dark Angels' victory over the Lutherites, and the Verses of Condemnation that listed the uncovering of the Fallen and their misdeeds since the quest had begun.

All the while, the *Blade of Caliban* cut through the ether searching for the *Saint Carthen*. Sen Neziel was in regular contact with the *Thor Fifteen*, and after eight days had passed, they had proceeded beyond Piscina III and were heading further into the inner reaches of the system. There had been a few false alarms, when one or other of the ships had detected an anomalous reading. Most turned out to be system malfunctions, radio-active asteroids, and once they came across a merchant trader that had suffered damage dropping out of the warp and had drifted in system, their long range communications array out of operation. The *Blade of Caliban* had nearly passed them by when they encountered the distress call. Boreas had a short and explosive exchange with the trader's master, refusing to abandon his search to guide the stray vessel back to the trade routes. A message of concern from the captain of the *Thor Fifteen* and Commander Kayle followed, but Boreas ignored them. He was focussed on the crusade, and would countenance no distraction or deviation from the goal of their search.

Boreas spent much time with the others, helping them come to terms with the revelations they had heard. He guided their prayers until they came to some rough understanding. Zaul had responded with anger, his hatred of the renegades fanned into a barely-controllable fury as Boreas taught him more of their betrayal and the civil war that had riven the Chapter. Damas's ire was colder, more introverted. He took every moment he could to work on his weapons and armour, painstakingly writing out the Opus Victorius on his power armour in tiny script, the act itself giving him release and focussing his thoughts on vengeance. Hephaestus similarly laboured in the ship's forge and workshop, blessing every gun, every bolt shell, every energy pack and blade with the strength of the Machine God. Thumiel spent his time on the firing range, chanting breathlessly as he fired round after round into static and moving targets,

cursing the Fallen with every shot. For him, the confrontation could not come soon enough.

And then there was Nestor. He seemed least changed by Boreas's unveiling of the Chapter's hidden past. He gave them all a thorough physical examination, the most rigorous he could devise, and declared them all to be in perfect fighting condition, ready for the holy war. He had perhaps changed in one way though – he seemed even quieter. He became even more closed and uncommunicative the longer the search dragged on, as if he wanted to be free of the ship itself. Whenever Boreas broached the subject, he would reply that he was intent on concluding their mission as soon as possible, for he feared for Piscina while the Fallen might be in the system.

This fact also troubled Boreas. In his urgency to pursue the *Saint Carthen*, he had brought all of his command with him. For the first time in millennia, there were no Space Marines on Piscina IV, only their attendants. Always, even on the short recruiting missions to Piscina V, Damas, Zaul or Thumiel had been left behind as commander of the keep. Boreas fretted that he had misjudged the situation, that perhaps he had been lured from Piscina by his foe. He dismissed the idea but it kept coming back to him, nagging at the back of his mind during prayer, teasing him as he practised battle drill with his brethren. But there was nothing he could do except follow to its conclusion the course of action he had chosen. It was his sacred duty as a member of the Deathwing to seek out the Fallen wherever they might be, and here was a golden opportunity to fulfil that duty. He had declared crusade and the future was now set, for good or ill. Piscina IV was still garrisoned by fifteen thousand Imperial Guard and the Imperial commander's own troops; even the Fallen would not be able to face such numbers if they attacked.

After nine days of searching, contact was made. The *Thor Fifteen* had detected a ship just outside the stellar orbit of Piscina II and was moving to investigate. Boreas ordered the *Blade of Caliban* to power with all speed to the area. Outwardly, there was nothing more significant about this contact than any of the others, but he felt inside that this time they were on to the foe, that the ultimate moment of confrontation was fast approaching. It was still two days' journey to intercept the rogue vessel, and he gathered the Dark Angels in the chapel. All was physically ready for the coming battle, now they were to make the last preparations of their minds and souls.

For the first day they fasted and meditated, each Space Marine alone with his own thoughts. Boreas spent this time on contemplation musing on the future.

Unless the Chapter was engaged in a full-scale war, the Tower of Angels would be redirecting itself to Piscina, dropping into the warp in response to Boreas's warning. Part of him worried that his fears were unfounded, and that his actions would be deemed rash and selfish. There was also part of him that wished that were true, for it would mean there were no Lutherites at Piscina, and he would not have to conduct another interrogation. He had performed one other since his encounter with Astelan, but it had been more straightforward than the first. The Space Marine had ranted and raved, totally corrupted by the Ruinous Powers, and despite the agonising attentions of Boreas had refused right to the end to repent his sins. He had finally died screaming from his numerous injuries, cursing the name of Lion El'Jonson. There had been none of the innuendo and guile of Astelan, none of the supposed revelations about the Horus Heresy, which even now disturbed the Chaplain's thoughts.

But the greater part of him wished for another confrontation with the ancient enemy. Boreas wanted the chance to prove his loyalty again, after many months of doubt and introspection. As much as Zaul, he longed for the cleansing of holy battle to wash over him, to wash away his questions and fears with the blood of his foes. Truly, Boreas realised with a shock as he prayed through the night, we live for battle and battle alone. A Space Marine never felt so strong of purpose, so alive and aware of his own potential, as when he was on the battlefield, and it was a feeling that Boreas had too long been denied. Even the clash with the orks had been perfunctory, clinical, a mere brawl compared to the battle of the basilica – a cold, precise engagement that had not tested him or distracted him from his problems.

On the second day, Boreas led the battle-brothers in final prayer.

*Born in the darkness, a dream given life,*
*Holy warriors to bring forth the light.*
*Armed with zeal, armoured with faith,*
*Gods of battle at the fore of the fight.*
*Swords of the Emperor, shields of mankind,*
*Destined for war, fated for death.*
*Protectors of the weak, slayers of evil,*
*We fight 'til we draw our last dying breath.*
*There is no retreat, there is no surrender,*
*Our hate of the foe drives us eternally on.*
*While aliens live, while heresy festers,*
*There can be no peace until the last war is won.*

*Strengthen your heart, harden your soul,*
*Launch yourself gladly into death's hungry maw.*
*There is no time for peace, no respite, no forgiveness,*
*There is only war.*

Physically ready, and spiritually pure, the Dark Angels waited impatiently as the *Blade of Caliban* neared the interception point. The *Thor Fifteen* was approaching from the inner planets, having made the detection on a return pass. It was partway through the middle watch of the day when the attendants at the rapid strike vessel's own augurs reported an energy source close at hand.

The *Thor Fifteen* had encountered the *Saint Carthen* first and was engaged in a long-range duel. The *Thor Fifteen's* captain, Jahel Stehr, was calling for aid when Boreas strode onto the bridge. He glanced at the main display screen and watched the battle for a moment. Flickering lasers rippled out from the gun decks of the renegade ship, strobing across the system ship's void shields in explosions of undulating blue waves. Missiles fired in return streaked across the starry backdrop but passed harmlessly beneath the *Saint Carthen*. The pirate vessel was closing on the Imperial ship, and within a few minutes would be able to pass her stern and fire into her engines. On all fronts, the *Thor Fifteen* looked outclassed.

'She's heavily armed for a merchantman,' Stehr's crackling voice reported. Boreas knew only too well what the enemy ship was capable of, having heard from Astelan how he had her fitted out as a pirate vessel that had laid waste to many convoys under his command.

The *Thor Fifteen* was ill-prepared and poorly commanded, Boreas assessed, and ordered maximum power from the plasma reactors in an attempt to close the distance as quickly as possible. He commanded the others to stand ready in the loading bays. His plan was to cripple the *Saint Carthen's* engines and then make a small strike at her command deck. Once under control, he would turn off the life support systems and kill everyone inside. He could take the vessel with minimal losses and, more importantly, if there were Fallen aboard, only he and the other Dark Angels would encounter them. As he had done a century ago, he and the others had sworn to protect the Chapter's dark secret with their lives. Like him, they would go to any lengths to prevent knowledge of the Fallen becoming widespread, for the shame was of the Dark Angels' making and it would be they alone who atoned for it.

'Whatever you do, ensure that you close off any escape route,' Boreas

responded. He glanced at the tactical display that was illuminated on the main screen. ‘We will be within attack range soon.’

‘Very well, Lord Boreas, we shall engage her for as long as possible,’ Stehr said. ‘We shall target her engines when we are able and attempt to board her.’

‘No!’ Boreas bellowed, causing everyone on the bridge to stop in shock. ‘My orders are clear, you are not to board the *Saint Carthen*.’

‘We risk getting cut to pieces here,’ Stehr protested. ‘Closing the range and boarding is the only chance we have.’

Boreas started to signal back, before realising that the *Thor Fifteen* had broken contact.

‘Keep signalling Captain Stehr to stand off the *Saint Carthen*,’ Boreas ordered the comms officer. ‘Tell him that if he attempts to do so, we shall be forced to intervene.’

Sen Neziel walked from the weapons command position with a data-slate in his hand and gave it to Boreas. He shared a smile with the old officer as he looked at the tactical information it contained. Readings from the *Blade of Caliban’s* sensor arrays, combined with a steady stream of technical reports from the *Thor Fifteen* indicated that the *Saint Carthen’s* weapons systems were broadside only. She had yet to fire to the fore during the engagement. It was perfect for Boreas’s purposes – they could attack from the front, launch an assault boat and fly in without facing a hail of fire. Of course, it was an assumption, and would be very dangerous if it proved wrong, but Boreas could see no other course of action if he wanted to take the enemy vessel without a protracted fight.

‘Capturing the vessel is our primary goal,’ Boreas told Neziel. ‘She must not escape, ram her if you have to.’

The weapons officer reported that they were nearly within firing range.

‘Sound full battle alert!’ shouted Boreas and the klaxons began to beat the crew to quarters as they prepared to open fire. The bridge buzzed into frantic activity as the orders were relayed to the stations across the ship.

‘Drop to combat speed, divert power to void shields,’ Neziel ordered after a nod from Boreas. ‘Load torpedo tubes two and four, plot firing solution to target.’

‘Torpedoes targeted.’

‘Shields at ninety per cent power.’

‘Engines at fifty per cent thrust, manoeuvring transferred from navigational to helm position.’

‘Gun batteries powered, crews mustering.’

‘Blast doors sealed, fires extinguished.’

‘Switch display to enhanced visual,’ Neziel concluded and the tactical display blinked out and reappeared on a sub screen, replaced by a view of the *Saint Carthen*. She was an elegant ship, with a raked cross-section and two clusters of plasma engines flanking her hull. Her metallic skin glinted with hundreds of yellow flashes as pulses of laser fire erupted from the cannons concealed within her belly. A flicker of blue and violet shimmered around her aft section as her shields absorbed a blast from the *Thor Fifteen.*

‘Lord Boreas, the *Thor Fifteen* is closing fast with the target, it looks as if she’s going to board,’ one of the surveyor officers reported. Boreas strode to the comms console and jabbed at the transmit rune.

‘*Thor Fifteen*,’ he demanded. ‘Abort your attempt to board or I will be forced to fire upon you.’

It took a few seconds for the reply to come through.

‘Emperor’s teeth, man!’ Stehr cursed over the speakers. ‘We’re on the same side! You can’t be serious.’

‘Torpedo controls, retarget trajectory on vector one-five-six,’ Boreas called to the weapons officer.

‘Confirm, new trajectory one-five-six,’ The officer replied after a moment at his panel.

‘Launch torpedoes,’ Boreas ordered, glancing at Neziel.

‘Are you sure, my lord?’ Neziel asked, checking his own tactical display. ‘At that course, we would be firing on the *Thor Fifteen*.’

‘Launch torpedoes!’ roared Boreas, causing Neziel and the other officers to flinch. ‘Question my orders again and I’ll have the tech-priests render you into servitors!’

‘Aye, my lord,’ Neziel said uncertainly. ‘Launch torpedoes, target vector one-five-six.’

‘Torpedoes away!’ the weapons officer called out.

Boreas activated the comms rune once more.

‘*Thor Fifteen*, cut speed by thirty per cent and alter course forty degrees to port,’ he said, darting an angry look at Neziel. ‘Failure to do so will result in impact with our torpedoes.’

‘You launched torpedoes at us?’ Stehr’s voice sounded hoarse over the link. ‘Whose side are you on, Emperor damn you!’

‘I repeat, alter course by forty degrees to port and reduce speed by thirty per cent,’ Boreas replied. ‘Break off your closing course and you will be safe.’

The Interrogator-Chaplain looked over at the surveyor officer’s station. He was

watching his reticule intently.

'*Thor Fifteen* reducing speed,' he said, confirming what Boreas was reading on his own tac-panel. 'She's veering to port and rising.'

'Good,' Boreas grunted. 'Prepare for assault boat launch, and power up the starboard batteries. I want the target's prow raked as we close.'

'Confirm target, please,' Neziel said pointedly.

'The *Saint Carthen*,' Boreas said with a scowl. 'Another remark like that, Neziel, and I will have you executed for insubordination. Am I understood?

'Forgive me, Lord Boreas,' Neziel said, hanging his head. 'I have never fired upon an allied vessel before.'

'Neither have I,' Boreas replied heavily. 'Signal the docking bay to prepare for my arrival. Neziel, I trust you will follow any subsequent orders to keep the *Thor Fifteen* from boarding. If she puts troops onto that vessel, they will be killed along with the enemy crew.'

'I am sorry, my lord,' Neziel said, wiping the sweat from his eyes. 'I understand now. The *Thor Fifteen* will be prevented from closing.'

'Good,' Boreas said, striding towards the doorway. He lifted his helmet from a stand next to the door and hooked it onto his belt.

'One other thing, my lord,' Neziel called after him. Boreas turned, a questioning look on his face. 'May the Emperor watch over you and guide your hand.'

'Thank you, Neziel,' Boreas said after a moment. 'The Emperor's blessing on you and our other subjects while we are gone. Keep the ship safe for me, Neziel.'

'I will, Lord Boreas, I will,' Neziel said with a smile and a nod.

With a roar and a judder, the assault boat launched explosively from the *Blade of Caliban's* hull. A modified drop pod, the assault boat was much like an armoured teardrop, with claw-like grappling clamps at its base and a ring of melta-burners set into the hull to cut through even the thickest armour of an enemy ship. Small manoeuvring thrusters burned sporadically along its length as Hephaestus steered the craft on an intercept course with the *Saint Carthen*. Satisfied that their trajectory was correct, he unlatched his harness and stood, his magnetic boots clamping him to the hull in the zero gravity. As he thudded down the hull towards Boreas, the Chaplain signalled for the others to rise.

'Time to impact?' The Interrogator-Chaplain asked, checking the chronometer display in his auto-senses.

‘Approximately twenty-seven Terran minutes, Brother Boreas,’ Hephaestus told him.

‘Display chronometer countdown, twenty-seven minutes,’ Boreas told his suit, and a readout flickered into life in the lower left of his field of vision, reeling down through the minutes and seconds. Though much could happen in half an hour in a space battle, Boreas trusted to the speed and small size of the assault boat to see them through to their objective. The augurs and scanners of a large vessel were immensely powerful, built to peer into the vast depths of space. However, an object as small as the assault boat was unlikely to register at all until within close range of the enemy’s low level scanners, and even if they were picked up, they would most likely appear as an errant asteroid or piece of debris.

‘Weapons check,’ he ordered, testing the activation stud of his crozius and clicking off the safety of his bolt pistol with his other hand. He made a count of the equipment on his belt, though they had all done so three times already in their pre-combat checks. Along with the powerfield-enclosed crozius and his bolt pistol, Boreas had five spare magazines, each carrying fifteen rounds; four fragmentation grenades; two blind grenades; two melta-bombs; five proximity--triggered anti-personnel mines; an auspex scanning array; a monomolecular-edged combat knife; a spare power cell for his crozius, and another for his rosarius conversion field generator.

Battle-brothers Zaul and Thumiel had their standard-issue boltguns and combat knives, as well as the same quantity of grenades and mines. Damas wore a massive powerfist on his right hand to complement his bolt pistol, and a chainsword hung at his belt next to his knife. Hephaestus carried a hefty power axe and a plasma pistol, both of them crafted by his own hand. Nestor also had a bolt pistol and chainsword, and the cabin filled with the throaty whirring of the spinning blades as he tested the motor. Satisfied that the weapons check was complete, Boreas bowed his head and the others followed suit.

‘What is it that gives us purpose?’ he intoned.

‘*War*,’ the others replied.

‘What is it that gives war purpose?’

*‘To vanquish the foes of the Emperor.’*

‘What is the foe of the Emperor?’

*‘The heretic, the alien and the mutant.’*

‘What is it to be an enemy of the Emperor?’

*‘It is to be damned.’*

‘What is the instrument of the Emperor’s damnation?’

*'We, the Space Marines, the angels of death.'*

'What is it to be a Space Marine?'

*'It is to be pure, to be strong, to show no pity, nor mercy, nor remorse.'*

'What is it to be pure?'

*'To never know fear, to never waver in the fight.'*

'What is it to be strong?'

*'To fight on when others flee. To stand and die in the knowledge that death brings ultimate reward.'*

'What is the ultimate reward?'

*'To serve the Emperor.'*

'Who do we serve?'

*'We serve the Emperor and the Lion, and through them we serve mankind.'*

'What is it to be Dark Angels?'

*'It is to be the first, the honoured, the sons of the Lion.'*

'What is our quest?'

*'To purge our shame through the death of those who turned from the Lion.'*

'What is our victory?'

*'To remake that which was broken, to earn the trust of the Emperor once more.'*

'And what is the fate of the Fallen we hunt?'

'*Retribution and death!*'

The last intonation was roared across the comm-link, a vocal thunder filled with anger and hatred.

Silence followed for a moment, and then Boreas took a small phial from a pouch at his belt. He walked along the line of Space Marines and dripped a little of the fluid within the phial onto the bowed helmet of each warrior.

'With the blessed waters of Caliban, I sanctify your souls to the Emperor and the Lion,' chanted Boreas as he performed the ritual. 'Be pure in mind, body and spirit. As the water flows over you, let your hate flow through you. As the lost water is spilt, let us spill the blood of our foes. As the water dries, let us harden our hearts to fear. We are the Dark Angels, the chosen of the Emperor, the holy knights of Caliban. The blood of the Lion flows through our veins. His strength beats in our hearts. His spirit resides within us.'

'Praise to the Lion,' the Dark Angels chorused, straightening up.

Boreas led them down the craft to stand at the exit port. Glancing at the countdown display, he saw that they were a little under ten minutes from impact.

Looking through the viewing plate, he could clearly see the *Saint Carthen*. The ship had haunted his nightmares for years, and now he looked upon it for real for

the first time. Barrages of high-powered laser blasts from the *Blade of Caliban* lanced overhead into the enemy ship. An explosion of purple and green waves of energy signalled a void shield being overloaded, and the next salvo crashed into the hull of the ship itself, spewing gouts of igniting air and tangles of wreckage.

'Lord Boreas!' suddenly the comm crackled into life with the urgent voice of Sen Neziel. 'We have detected power build-ups in the lower prow of the *Saint Carthen*. I believe she possesses forward batteries and is about to open fire.'

'Close in, brace for impact and draw her fire!' Boreas spat back. 'Launch torpedoes to mask our signal!'

Despite the perilous situation of the assault boat, Boreas couldn't help but admire the cunning of the *Saint Carthen*'s captain. During the fight with the *Thor Fifteen* he had been presented with plenty of opportunities to conclude the fight if he had launched an attack with his prow batteries, but instead he had prolonged the duel to tempt the *Blade of Caliban* into a vulnerable position. His assumption might yet prove dangerous, but he was still confident that they would reach their target. The chances of a main gun being able to lock on to something as small and fast as the assault boat were slim, but there was also a chance that the Dark Angels would unintentionally get caught in the fire from the enemy.

'Hephaestus, get back to the piloting chair and steer us upwards, I want to get above the battery's elevation of fire,' he ordered, staring intently through the armoured port. His augmented eyes picked out the flaring trails of a missile salvo, disappearing below the assault boat as the Techmarine clambered back to the controls and set the boosters to push the craft out of the *Saint Carthen*'s line of fire.

It was then that the pirate vessel's anti-boarding turrets opened fire. A lattice of laser beams erupted from six point-defence emplacements scattered across her prow. Far too small to worry a starship, they were still more than powerful enough to blast the assault boat into shrapnel with a direct hit. Flickering beams of blue energy enclosed the assault boat, and Boreas's helmet automatically dropped a filter over his eye-lenses to stop him being blinded by the glare.

He checked the countdown again. Two minutes until impact.

'Scan for possible location of command chamber,' Boreas told Hephaestus. From here, the forecastle of the *Saint Carthen* was a mass of turrets, armoured plating and observation galleries. One of them had to be the bridge though, and Boreas wanted to punch into the ship as close as possible to the nerve centre. His plan was hinged on a swift, decisive strike. Even in close confines and with far

superior armour and armaments, they would not be able to hold out against an entire ship's crew. They had to take the bridge and cut the life support within minutes, or else they would be trapped and killed. Or worse, Boreas realised with a start, they might be captured. The thought repelled him, and he resolved that he would take his own life rather than fall into the hands of the Lutherites.

'I've located a communications array,' Hephaestus reported, breaking Boreas's morbid thoughts. 'Guidance systems locked on.'

The hull shook as a las-beam scored along the outside, melting partway through the armoured shielding of the assault boat. An instant later, they took another hit, which caused the lights to short out and explode.

'*Terrorsight*,' Boreas barked to his armour and his vision instantly cleared as the sophisticated lens array creating an artificial view from powerful emitted radiation waves rather than ordinary light.

'Stand-by for impact,' Boreas warned as the hull of the *Saint Carthen* rushed towards him through the window. Retro-jets fired at the last moment, slowing their pace slightly.

It was still a tremendous impact when the assault boat hit home. The servos and muscle bundles in Boreas's armour whined and creaked to keep him upright as the ablative nose-cone of the craft was crushed and the docking clamps lashed out, tearing into metal and pulling the assault boat tight against the enemy ship. With a white-hot flare, the melta-cutters burst into life, searing through ceramite and metal in a few seconds, before pneumatic rams punched out, hurling the severed section into the enemy vessel and leaving a serrated circular opening into the metres-thick armour plates. Boreas hit the button for the assault ramp and it swung down with a clang.

Instantly, a storm of las-fire filled the opening. A beam struck Boreas's helmet, knocking his head back. The roar of Zaul's bolter filled his ears and drowned out the zip of lasguns. Recovering quickly, Boreas leapt down the ramp, taking in the four bloody bodies strewn across the metal mesh of the passageway they had cut into, great holes ripped into them by the explosive bolts. More of the enemy crouched behind pillars and buttresses, firing wildly at the attacking Space Marines.

Zaul and Hephaestus flanked Boreas as he levelled his bolt pistol at the nearest target, a man with a visored helmet who had paused to change the energy cell on his lasgun. An aiming reticule sprang up in Boreas's sight as the bolt pistol's targeter linked into his helmet. He squeezed the trigger softly as it changed to red, and a moment later a flickering trail of fire marked the bolt's passage. It tore

through the man's padded vest without slowing before its mass-reactive warhead detonated, ripping his chest open from the inside. Boreas and the others advanced steadily down the corridor, each step punctuated by the bark of a bolter or pistol and the scream of a dying man.

'Forward for the Emperor!' Boreas bellowed.

'Retribution and death!' answered Zaul as his bolter ejected its empty magazine and he smoothly took another from his belt and slammed it home, las-shots pattering harmlessly off his power armour.

Las-shots also struck Boreas repeatedly, searing the paint from his left shoulder pad, scorching a mark across his left gauntlet, glancing harmlessly from the shaped armour plates protecting his thighs and groin. A ball of flickering blue plasma erupted from Hephaestus's pistol to his left, punching through a stanchion and incinerating the man cowering behind it, his steaming arm and head flung messily to the deck. Twenty metres ahead, the corridor met an intersection, with passages continuing ahead and to the left. Three dozen bodies left in their wake, the Space Marines continued their relentless assault to the junction and took up covering positions. Boreas shot away the leg of a crewman as he attempted to run away, his scream echoing in the Interrogator-Chaplain's audio pick-ups. Suddenly quiet descended, as the last enemies fled out of sight.

'Status check,' Boreas demanded, his pistol aiming down the corridor to the left. Zaul and Thumiel had the forward approach covered.

'Entry point cleared,' confirmed Zaul. 'Praise the Lion!'

'We need to orientate with the bridge,' said Boreas, holstering his pistol and passing his auspex to Hephaestus. The Techmarine activated the scanner and swung it in a slow arc to the left and right and then up and down. Swirling static on its screen coalesced into an image of their surroundings, extending out some fifty metres.

'I have numerous life-signs ahead and to the right,' Hephaestus reported, holding out the auspex. 'I'm detecting the power grid, there seems to be a terminal thirty metres ahead, in a chamber to the right. Detecting communications nexus as well, same position.'

'Zaul, Nestor, secure this point,' Boreas ordered, taking the proffered auspex from the Techmarine. There were between thirty and forty crewman nearby, waiting around a corner ahead, and within side rooms to the left. 'Prepare for counter-attack. The rest of you with me. Take and hold the terminal chamber.'

The Space Marines stalked quickly ahead, and just as they approached the sealed door to the chamber, the crash of bolters sounded out behind them.

‘Enemy attacking, heavy casualties inflicted,’ Nestor reported. ‘No assistance required.’

Hephaestus bent to examine the keypad next to the chamber door. At that moment, more than twenty of the *Saint Carthen*’s crew charged from around the corner ahead. Bullets clattered off the bulkheads and las-fire flashed brightly down the corridor. Thumiel returned fire immediately, his bolter firing on semi-automatic, carving a path of bloody craters across the chests of the first line of attackers, hurling them from their feet into those that followed behind. By the time they had clambered over the dead, Boreas had his bolt pistol in his left hand and was firing, the bolts punching fist-sized holes into the poorly protected men. The last few realised their mistake too late and were cut down as they tried to turn and run, their lifeless bodies falling upon the heap of those already dead.

‘They’ve engaged security rites, the area is locked-down,’ Hephaestus reported.

‘If I may?’ Damas said, holding up his powerfist, which erupted with a sheen of shimmering blue energy.

‘Affirmative,’ Boreas agreed with a nod, turning his attention back to the auspex. There were no life signs within fifty metres.

Damas squared up to the armoured door and placed his left hand against it. Clenching his powerfist, he swung. A thunderous detonation boomed down the corridor as his fist smashed through the metal. Opening his hand, he peeled away the torn metal as if it were paper-thin, ripping a hole large enough for them to duck through.

‘Thumiel, sentry point. Zaul and Nestor, remote secure area and advance to this position.’ After receiving their affirmative replies, the Interrogator-Chaplain pushed his way into the power chamber, followed by Hephaestus and Damas. It was not large, barely five metres square, and filled with thrumming power conduits and coils of finger-thick communications cables.

‘Relay interface,’ Hephaestus said, pointing at a screen and terminal to their left. Boreas gave him a nod, and stepped over to the machine. Pulling an assortment of wires from his backpack, Hephaestus tried a couple until he found one that could connect with the interface. ‘Assimilating schematics,’ the Techmarine announced.

Boreas checked his chronometer. Just short of two minutes had passed since they had initiated the boarding action. Another fifteen seconds went by before Hephaestus declared that he had the information he needed.

‘We’re four levels down from the main control bridge, and about sixty metres to the starboard,’ he told them. He paused for a moment as he consulted with the

three-dimensional layout plan he had taken from the communications grid. ‘There’s an ascensor shaft twenty metres further on, which will give us access to the bridge entryway.’

Boreas’s comm buzzed as it received an external transmission and decoded it.

‘Lord Boreas,’ he heard Sen Neziel say. ‘*Saint Carthen* has reduced her fire considerably. I believe she is mustering her crew to repel boarders.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Boreas answered, before he turned to Hephaestus. ‘How secure is this area?’

‘One access point by the stairwell within one hundred metres, three ascensors within the same distance,’ he replied after a brief pause.

‘Can you shut down the ascensors from here?’ Boreas asked.

‘Not quickly, rites of command have been initiated,’ the Techmarine said with a shake of his head. ‘However, from here we can cut the power grid to the whole section, which will slow down reinforcements.’

‘Agreed,’ Boreas said with a nod. ‘Set melta-bombs.’

As Hephaestus began placing the charges, helped by Damas, who was following the Techmarine’s directions for the best sites, Boreas ducked back into the corridor where Zaul, Thumiel and Nestor were waiting for him.

‘Zaul, Thumiel, advance around the corner and secure the ascensor,’ he ordered. They headed off up the corridor, bolters held ready. Hephaestus and Damas hurried back out of the relay chamber, a moment before the interior was lit by white-hot light. Sparks cascaded from the severed energy lines and instantly the lights died. Boreas’s artificial sight bathed everything in a red haze.

‘Quick advance, that will only slow them down for a short while,’ Boreas said, leading the others after Zaul and Thumiel. Passing the corner, he saw the two battle-brothers flanking the double doors that gave access to the ascensor shaft. With his power armour-enhanced strength, it only took a moment for Boreas to force the doors open. The shaft stretched several levels above and below their position. The ascensor itself was on the next level down.

‘Thumiel, Zaul, covering positions on the shaft. Nestor hold this point. Hephaestus and Damas with me,’ he said before holstering his pistol and jumping out into the shaft to cling onto the ascensor’s cables. The threaded metal creaked under the additional weight. Certain that it would not hold up to the strain of three fully armoured Space Marines, Boreas leant across the shaft and drove his fingers through the comparatively thin metal walls, securing himself a hand hold. Releasing the grip of his other hand, he swung over the gap, the toe of his boot driving into the wall. Steadying himself, he set about climbing up the

shaft, punching hand and footholds as he went.

Suddenly light filled the shaft as doors opened above. Zaul fired immediately, the traces of the bolts screaming up past Boreas to explode three levels above his head. Something bloody and ragged fell past him and landed on the top of the ascensor with a wet thud. He ignored the intermittent gunfire coming from above and below as he climbed, concentrating on maintaining his balance as he clambered up through the erratic las-fire and the whirring of bullets.

One level down from the open doorway, which was also the floor on which the bridge was located, Boreas stopped and glanced down. Hephaestus was just a couple of metres below him, and Damas a similar distance further down. He signalled for them to stop climbing and pulled a fragmentation grenade from his belt. With his free hand, he primed the timer for a one-second delay then flipped the firing pin and lobbed the grenade up. It arced slightly towards the open door and exploded in mid-flight, shrapnel clattering noisily off his armour and shredding anything stood in the open portal. With a grunt, he pulled himself up a couple more handholds and then leapt for the opening, his fingers digging into the mesh of the floor.

Hauling himself up, he pulled out his crozius and looked around. Four dismembered bodies littered the hallway he found himself in. He stared face-to-face with a group of more than a dozen crewmen, armed with lasguns and shotguns, who staggered back, terrified.

‘*External address*. No mercy, no respite, no retreat!’ Boreas bellowed, his exterior speakers turning his battlecry into a deafening roar that stunned the traitors even more.

He was on them before they could react, his crozius smashing the jaw from one and crushing the chest of another with his return swing. Hephaestus sprinted past him, his glowing axe cleaving another in two through the midriff and lopping the arm off another. They broke and fled, but couldn’t outrun the Space Marines as they bounded forward with long, powered strides, hacking them down from behind, their power weapons leaving a trail of steaming blood and cauterised flesh.

‘Exit point secured,’ barked Boreas. ‘Reform at my position.’

As he waited for Nestor, Zaul and Thumiel to catch up, Boreas checked the chronometer again. Five and a half minutes since the operation had begun. He unslung the auspex and activated it, pointing it in the direction of the bridge. The flickering screen was almost completely white with pulsing life signals.

‘Full charge, close assault,’ he announced when the others were all present.

‘Covering fire Zaul and Thumiel, rearguard Nestor.’

They nodded in understanding and readied their weapons for the final push. Hephaestus jabbed the button to open the chamber’s portal.

‘For the Lion!’ cried Boreas, launching himself out into the entryway that led to the bridge.

The passageway was deserted and Boreas halted just a few steps down, momentarily puzzled. It stretched ahead for twenty metres before opening out onto a hallway. Right in front of him stood the doors to the bridge, a heavily armoured portal with hydraulic bars dropped into place. He checked the auspex again; it still read overwhelming life signals. He thumped it with the butt of his -pistol and it gave a plaintive electronic whine and the display faded.

‘Brother-chaplain, I am detecting an interference signal emanating from the bridge,’ Hephaestus announced. ‘They are jamming our scanners.’

Boreas hooked the auspex back onto his belt and looked back at the others.

‘They have taken refuge inside the bridge itself,’ he said, advancing cautiously along the corridor, the others following him. ‘Impossible to know how many of them there are, we must assume it will be heavily guarded.’

‘We do not have breaching equipment to cut through the portal,’ Hephaestus told them.

‘Are there any other access points?’ Boreas asked as they reached the hallway. It too was empty of life. Boreas spotted a scanning lens set into the wall above the door and shot it with his bolt pistol, sending sparks cascading down onto his armour.‘

‘There are several weak points in the bulkhead itself,’ Hephaestus replied, his head turning left and right as he surveyed the wall.

‘*Augment terrorsight*,’ Boreas muttered and his constructed vision faded to a wireframe schematic. He could see the wall, the banks of machinery and consoles beyond, the enemy crew standing out as red blobs amongst the overlapping lines. There were at least three dozen waiting inside, probably more, many of them clustered around the doorway. He saw the outline of Hephaestus moving forward as he indicated a section of the bulkhead that was thinner than the rest. ‘*Cease augmentation*,’ Boreas told his armour and a hazy approximation of normal sight returned.

‘If we use the rest of our melta-bombs, we can blast a hole through here,’ the Techmarine said, activating his power axe and scoring a rough outline into the metal of the wall about five metres right of the doorway. He marked six points to indicate where to attach the melta-bombs. Damas collected the charges and set to

work, de-activating their timers so that they would only explode by remote detonation. When it was done, they gathered in a semi-circle a couple of metres back from the breaching point, readying their frag grenades.

'Zaul, Damas, first in and break to the right. Hephaestus and Nestor next in to cover forward. Thumiel follow with me to the left,' Boreas snapped out the plan. 'Prime grenades with three-second fuse.'

Damas took a step forward, his powerfist glowing, with Zaul slightly crouched behind him. Hephaestus glanced over at Boreas and the Interrogator-Chaplain gave a small nod. With a hiss and then a loud crack, the melta-bombs detonated, melting through the metal bulkhead in an instant. Damas jumped forward, his powerfist smashing through the weakened wall and clattered into the bridge, his bolt pistol firing. Zaul followed quickly, bolter held in one hand, combat knife gripped in the other. His chanting sounded over the comm-link as Nestor and Hephaestus followed up, their pistols spewing fire. Boreas charged in next and rounded to the left towards the door, Thumiel close behind him, his bolter roaring.

There were twenty or so officers and crewmen by the entry portal, armed with a mixture of lasguns, stub pistols and shotguns. They were turning in reaction to the attack but Boreas opened fire first. The first bolt tore into the face of a man with a red bandana, a moment before his head was vapourised. The second round ripped into the butt of a shotgun and flung the man back as his firearm exploded in his hands.

Boreas launched himself across the gap, still firing, his crozius held above his head. Flares of light reflected off the gleaming surfaces of control panels and displays as his conversion field burst into life as shotgun rounds, las-bolts and bullets pelted into him. He took a heavy hit to his right knee and stumbled. A lucky shot had pierced the bendium seal between the armour plates on his leg but the pain passed in an instant as his armour stimulated his pain-suppressing glands to kick into action. Thumiel loomed over the Interrogator-Chaplain, spent bolt casings showering around him as he fired semi-automatic bursts into the enemy.

With a grunt, Boreas pushed himself upright, dropping his pistol and gripping his crozius in two hands. The first swing threw a man five metres across the bridge to land heavily in a crash of splintering dials and exploding wires. His next blow crushed the chest of an officer in a long blue coat decorated with gold braiding. He slumped to the floor, blood bubbling from his lips from his collapsed lungs. Another man had drawn his sword and chopped wildly at

Boreas's head. The blade crashed off his helmet and threw his head back. The Interrogator-Chaplain let go of his crozius with his right hand and as the next attack swung in, he warded it away with his arm, his gauntleted fist closing around the blade. Exerting his strength, the blade buckled and twisted between Boreas's fingers until it snapped. He rammed the point into the man's throat and let go, leaving his body to fall to the floor drenched in arterial blood.

Only three men were left alive and they threw down their weapons and raised their hands above their heads. Zaul fired into the chest of the first, ripping apart his spine and internal organs. Boreas grabbed the head of the next in his hand and snapped his neck, tossing the body aside with ease. The third man collapsed to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks, his white trousers stained as he soiled himself. The man gibbered some unholy prayer before Boreas's booted foot crashed into the back of his head, stamping his life out on the hard deck.

'Damas, Nestor, secure entry point,' the Chaplain barked, turning from the sprawl of bodies and pointing to the smoking breach in the bulkhead. 'Hephaestus, locate and shut down artificial gravity and life support systems.'

The bridge was theirs.

# THE TALE OF ASTELAN

## PART FOUR

Voices called to Astelan from the dark shadows of the cell. He thrashed feverishly within his chains, his once mighty frame now wasted and haggard. Not a scrap of flesh had been left unmarked by the Interrogator-Chaplain's cruel ministrations.

Astelan's mind felt as equally ravaged by the psychic intrusions of Samiel. His body battered, his thoughts in tatters, he struggled to maintain a fragile grip on reality.

Unable to move his head very far, his world had constricted to a space only a few metres across. He knew every crack and crevice above him, he could picture them in his head as clearly as a map. He knew there were thirteen blades, three drills, five augurs, eight clamps, nine brands and two barbed hooks on the shelf. He could remember the feel of every one on his flesh, each a little different. Even when Boreas was not there wielding his vicious implements, so confused was Astelan's mind that sometimes he would wake feeling their savage touch upon him.

With creeping fingers, he had counted the links on his chains hundreds of times to keep his thoughts occupied. Every moment that he did not concentrate on something, the voices returned.

He had long given up his refusal to sleep. It mattered not that he cried out when the nightmares assailed him. Awake, he was barely more lucid, the barriers between what was a dream and what was real had blurred for some time.

All this he knew, from a detached, coherent part of his mind that sometimes fought through to take control. He knew the voices were simply echoes in his head of Boreas's questioning and the psychic probing of Samiel. He knew that it was merely an illusion of his tortured senses when the shadows grew hands that

reached out towards him. But those times were few, and his moments of lucidity were growing rarer and shorter.

Astelan had lost count of the number of visits he'd had from his captors. Perhaps it had been fifty, perhaps five hundred. Sometimes he argued, other times he shut himself away, ignoring the slice of the scalpel in his flesh, the boring of the drill through his bones, the searing of his skin on the tip of a brand. Boreas came and went, Samiel came and went, and there was no pattern that Astelan could fathom. Sometimes he awoke to see Boreas standing there watching him, listening to his nightmare-induced screams. Other times the Chaplain plied him with questions, examining every aspect of his answers, but did not inflict any more pain on him. Sometimes there was only pain and no questions, or the insidious whispering of the psyker inside his head, calling him a liar and an oath-breaker.

As he lay there, tormented and delirious, he dreaded the sound of the large brass key in the lock. And then there were the times when he longed for Boreas to return, when his strained mind could no longer be contained and he had to communicate his raging thoughts. He struggled to remember why he was here, and then recollection would surge back, washing away the pain. Though it was a constant struggle, somehow he managed to retain a small piece of what he had been.

In his mind he pictured it as a glowing star hidden away in the centre of his brain. Shadows snatched at it, the burning red eyes of the warlock studied it, but it was safe and secure. It was his dream, his ambition. The return to the glory of the Great Crusade, the casting aside of the meaningless institutions and arrangements that had brought mankind low. As he concentrated on it, the glowing star would grow, fuelled by his memories, fanned into greater life by his desire.

Astelan knew that he would never see the Greater Imperium, would never again lead the armies of the Emperor across war zones amidst the crash of bolters and the crackling of flames. That was beyond him now; they had taken that from him when he had given himself up on Tharsis. If he had known, if he had truly realised what they had intended, he would have fought harder than he had ever fought before.

Regret turned to grief as he saw his plan lying in shattered pieces, the golden star just a hazy glow that bobbed and weaved, eluding him. For centuries he had been a protector, a leader, a warrior bred for conquest. He looked at the wreck he had become and cursed the Dark Angels, and cursed Lion El'Jonson who had set

them on this path. Grief turned to anger and he raged feebly at the chains that bound him to the stone table, barely able to lift himself.

Astelan felt a familiar breeze on his check and looked at the open door, his head lolling weakly onto the slab. Through bruised and bloodshot eyes he saw Boreas enter. Inwardly, Astelan was grateful that Boreas had come alone. The Interrogator-Chaplain walked quickly to the slab, and Astelan heard the clanking of chains and the metallic scratching of a key in a lock. One by one, the chains fell away, their great weight lifting off his limbs and chest. Unencumbered by the heavy iron, Astelan tried to sit up, but found he had not the strength to do so.

'Try harder,' Boreas said softly in his ear. 'Your muscles need reminding what they are for. Try again and they will start to remember.'

Astelan croaked wordlessly, focusing every fibre of his being, summoning all the strength he had. His spine felt like it was on fire, every joint in his body ached and his muscles screamed with the exertion, but after what seemed like hours, Astelan managed to pull and push himself upright.

'Very good,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said, pacing back and forth in front of him. Boreas pointed towards the door. 'You can leave now.'

Astelan turned his head slowly between the door and Boreas, not really understanding what the Chaplain was saying. He frowned, unable for the moment to recall the words to communicate his dulled thoughts.

'Do you have a question?'

Astelan closed his eyes and concentrated. With a supreme effort of will, he stopped his mind from spinning. He pointed feebly at his throat.

'You require some water?'

Astelan nodded, his head flopping uselessly from side to side as he did so.

'Very well,' Boreas agreed, walking out of the door. Astelan sat there, staring at the light from the guttering torches beyond. It burnt his eyes after so long in the dull shadows. All he had to do was stand and walk five paces and he would be out of the cell, but he was exhausted. He would gather his strength, and then he would walk free.

The Chaplain returned holding a jug of water and goblet.

'You wish to leave, yes?' he said, and Astelan noticed for the first time that his hands were stretched out towards the door. He dropped them back to his side.

Boreas stepped forward and poured water into the goblet before placing the jug on the ground. He took one of Astelan's hands and wrapped the fingers around the goblet, and then did the same with the other hand. As the Chaplain took his hands away, the cup slipped from Astelan's grasp and clattered to the ground,

splashing him with water as it fell. The cold sharpened his senses immediately.

'Try again,' Boreas urged him, refilling the goblet and holding it out towards him, within easy reach. 'You managed to sit up, now you can manage to drink by yourself.'

Astelan's fingers clawed at the cup, but Boreas's grip was firm until he had it safely in his hands. He raised the goblet shaking to his lips and dribbled a few drops onto his tongue. Savouring the sensation, he let a few more drips into his mouth, before he could resist the urge no longer and gulped down the contents. The water refreshed him immediately, washing away some of the confusion and pain.

'I can leave?' he asked, his voice wavering.

'The door is there, all you have to do is stand up and walk out.'

'No trickery?'

'I am above trickery, I am following my sacred calling.'

'You will not close the door before I reach it?'

'No, you have my oath as a Space Marine that I will not close the door before you reach it. In fact, that door is never going to be closed again while you are in this cell. You are free to leave at any time you wish.'

Astelan sat there and pondered Boreas's words for a while, his thoughts slow at first but gathering pace and clarity. Nodding to himself as he reached his decision, Astelan pushed himself forward onto the floor, his legs buckling, but he held himself up against the slab. Boreas stepped back out of his way and waved him towards the door.

'Very good, commander,' Boreas said with a nod. 'Just a few steps and you will be out of this cell.'

Astelan looked at him, but the Chaplain's expression was noncommital and told him nothing. Summoning his strength, he took a step forward, still leaning against the stone table. His legs barely held his weight and he cautiously pulled back his hand until he was standing free, swaying from side to side. He took a step forward, shuffling his foot along the ground, feeling his maltreated joints grinding as he did so. Pain lanced through his knees, hips and spine, and he gritted his teeth against the agony. In front, the rectangle of light beyond the door swam in and out of focus.

'You do understand what leaving means?' Boreas said to him. Astelan ignored his taunts and took another faltering step forward. 'If you leave this cell, it is because you are afraid. It is because you know your convictions to be false.'

Astelan turned to look at the Chaplain.

‘I do not understand,’ he said.

‘Your great vision, the mighty plan,’ Boreas explained. ‘I do not believe you. I think you are a liar and a tyrant who has never acted out of anything other than selfish desires.’

‘That is not true,’ Astelan argued. ‘I did it for the Emperor, it was for mankind.’

‘I am not convinced. But, you are leaving, are you not? It is immaterial whether I believe you or not. Of course, you are dying, even a Space Marine cannot endure what I have subjected you to. For all your superhuman organs and unnatural strength, they have failed you now and without medical assistance you will soon die. You have lasted long, your gene-seed is very strong. Perhaps the Apothecaries will study it after you have passed on. But you will die peacefully.’

‘I do not live for a peaceful death!’ Astelan’s voice was little more than a rasp.

‘What do you live for then?’ asked Boreas.

‘Death in battle, to build the Imperium of Man, to serve the Emperor,’ croaked Astelan weakly.

‘And you do that by walking out of that door and lying down to die in some forgotten chamber, do you?’ Boreas’s mocking tone lashed at Astelan, sending his thoughts spinning into turmoil again. ‘Are you running from the fight, Chapter commander? Are you afraid that perhaps your convictions are not as strong as you thought, that perhaps your lies are beginning to unravel? But, leave! Leave and die with the knowledge that you did not have to face that ultimate test, that you abandoned the chance to tell me more of your vision, to convince me of your worth. Leave and you will save yourself much misery and pain, and I will know that you die as a heretic because it will prove to me that you are weak. That you are the type of man that could break his oaths, that could turn and attack his masters, and wage bloody war against those he once served. Leave!’

‘No!’ Astelan took a step towards Boreas, a sudden surge of strength welled up within him, fuelled by his anger. ‘I am right! I tread the true path, it is you who have wandered.’

‘Then stay and prove it,’ offered Boreas. ‘How much pain is the Emperor’s true will worth? The pain you feel now? The same amount again? Thrice as much? How much pain will you endure to stay true to the Emperor?’

‘All the pain in the galaxy, if it proves to you that what I say is true,’ Astelan replied.

‘Do you believe me now that I could keep you alive for a hundred days?’ Boreas asked.

‘Yes, yes I believe it,’ Astelan said, his head nodding against his chest.

‘And yet you have only endured my attention for fifteen days,’ the Chaplain told him with a grim smile.

‘Fifteen days? That is not possible.’ The strength that Astelan had felt leeched from his body. Could it possibly be true? Had he undergone only fifteen days of this torment?

‘I do not lie, what would be the purpose?’ Boreas said, crossing his arms. ‘You were brought here only fifteen days ago. That torment, that pain, is the work of a mere fifteen days. You can end it all. Just three steps and you will have left this cell, left the agony behind.’

Astelan looked at the glow beyond the door, which beckoned and taunted him with equal strength. He took two steps forward, up to the door itself, and stopped there to ease his protesting body.

‘A single step, just a single step from peace,’ Boreas goaded him.

Astelan leant on the door, and turned his head to look at the Interrogator-Chaplain over his shoulder. Swinging his arm, he slammed the door shut, the clang reverberating around the cell. For an instant, just a fraction of a moment, Boreas’s studied expression changed, a glimmer of approval that quickly faded back to the Chaplain’s normal blank demeanour.

Astelan straightened himself and walked purposefully back to the slab and lay down upon it, and stared at Boreas. The Interrogator-Chaplain walked over and leaned over his prisoner.

‘Very well, you have made your choice,’ he said. ‘But there is still another way. A way without chains, without pain, without Brother Samiel.’

‘I wish to hear no more of your tricks,’ Astelan replied, turning his head away.

‘There is no need for this. I can put away the blades and hooks, and we will just speak, as one Space Marine to another,’ Boreas said, his voice quiet and soothing. ‘All I ask is that you open your mind and your heart. Examine your feelings, probe your motives. Look with eyes untainted by centuries of hate, years of isolation and misunderstanding. Scrutinise your ambitions and see if they are pure.’

‘I know that they are,’ Astelan said defiantly.

‘For now,’ Boreas argued, leaning forward on the slab. ‘But we will just talk, and you will listen to me as I will listen to you, and you will learn that your arguments have no weight.’

‘I think not,’ snorted Astelan.

‘Then if you have nothing to hide from, speak freely, tell me your story, open

your thoughts to me and we shall see,' Boreas said insistently.

Astelan sat up and looked directly at Boreas, but he could read nothing in the Interrogator-Chaplain's expression.

'What do you wish to know?' Astelan asked.

'Tell me of Caliban, your homeworld,' Boreas said.

'You talk of speaking openly and with truth, and yet your first question is based upon ignorance,' Astelan started to laugh but it turned to a choke that made him retch.

'What do you mean?' Boreas's brow was creased with a frown of confusion.

'Caliban is not my homeworld, it never was,' Astelan told him, lying back against the slab and pausing until his ragged breathing had eased. 'I was of the old Legion, of the Dark Angels before the coming of Lion El'Jonson. I was born on Terra, from a family whose forefathers had freed the ancient birthplace of humanity from the evil grip of the Age of Strife. Since the Emperor revealed himself and his purpose, my people have fought alongside him. When first he began to breed a new type of superhuman warrior, it was from my people that he took his first test subjects. With their aid, the Emperor reconquered Terra and humanity was on the brink of launching into a golden age, the Age of the Imperium. So it is not strange that when he perfected his techniques for the creation of the Space Marines, many of my people were chosen to lead the Great Crusade, myself amongst them. That is why you speak in lies, because Terra was the world of my birth.'

'So you cared nothing for Caliban?' suggested Boreas.

'That is not true either,' Astelan said, closing his eyes, feeling the sweat from his exertions rolling down his face. 'As the Legions conquered the galaxy, rediscovered human worlds and freed them from aliens and their own self-destructive ignorance, we came across the primarchs. It had been a version of the gene-seed that the Emperor had used to create us, so each of the primogenitors, the Legions, in part were bound to the fate of their primarch. When the Emperor found Lion El'Jonson on Caliban, we all celebrated. The Emperor told us that the Dark Angels had a new home and we were filled with joy, for we were now far from Terra.'

'So what happened next? What started you on that dark path to treachery?' Boreas's voice was flat, emotionless.

'We adopted Caliban as our own, and when El'Jonson was given the command of the Legion, we thought it fitting,' Astelan answered slowly, having to gather his thoughts before every sentence, ignoring the accusations of treachery. He no

longer had the strength to argue every barbed comment made by Boreas. ‘It was good that new Chapters of Dark Angels would be raised from Caliban’s people, for it gave them identity and focus, something that was precious in those tumultuous times. I did not know then that our new primarch would betray us, would destroy everything that we had created.’

‘Tell me of the fighting on Caliban. How did it begin?’ asked Boreas.

‘Our glorious primarch, in his supposed wisdom, had abandoned us there. He had turned from those who had come before him, who had welcomed him as a lost father and taken his homeworld as their own.’ A chill swept over Astelan’s body as he thought of the events that had led to his defiance of the primarch. He looked at Boreas. ‘It had been a grave mistake, but we had sworn oaths of loyalty and we would not break them. We hoped that our primarch would see the error he had made. I sent deputations to him to reconsider his decision, but they were all returned without a reply. Not even a reply! From afar, El’Jonson was pouring scorn on us with his silence.’

‘And that is how Luther bent you to his evil ways?’ Boreas asked, his voice now becoming more insistent.

‘Luther? Ha!’ Astelan’s exclamation dissolved into another painful cough and it was several seconds before he could speak again. ‘Your histories demonise him, blame him for all that has befallen the Dark Angels, and yet you know so little of the truth. It is convenient for your legends to show him as the arch-villain, the viper within the nest while the great Lion conquered the galaxy, but El’Jonson’s betrayal of Luther was the greatest of all! Without me, Luther would have been left ranting and shouting from his tower to no avail.’

‘Are you saying that it was *you* who was responsible for the schism of our Legion, and not Luther?’ Boreas gasped, unable to mask his disbelief. ‘That is a grand and dire claim to make!’

‘I did not say that,’ Astelan said quietly. ‘Rarely are the facts of history as convenient as written words pretend. Luther had the most to be aggrieved about, that is for certain. He had been like a father to the primarch, his closest friend and ally. He had saved El’Jonson from death in the woods. And what did El’Jonson do to repay him? He banished him to Caliban, like the rest of us. He left him to rot while he sought glory for himself.’

‘Luther was the Lion’s guardian of Caliban,’ Boreas said, starting to pace back and forth across the chamber. ‘He had been honoured by the primarch, in showing such faith and trust in him to leave the protection of his homeworld in Luther’s hands.’

‘Luther was almost as great a commander of men as Lion El’Jonson,’ argued Astelan. ‘Though our primarch was gifted beyond compare as a planner and strategist, Luther knew the hearts and minds of men well, better than El’Jonson ever did. When the Emperor had first arrived, and the Dark Angels were given to El’Jonson to lead, Luther had wept that he was too old to become a Space Marine.’

‘As did many of the knights of Caliban,’ replied Boreas, stopping his pacing and looking directly at Astelan. ‘That is why the Emperor sent his best chirurgeons and apothetechs, so that those who were too old for the primarch’s gene-seed might still be given many of the benefits of our altered bodies, living long past their natural deaths and capable of great feats of arms.’

‘And so is it not even stranger that Luther should be left on Caliban, rather than leading those warriors on the field of battle?’ asked Astelan, shifting his weight so that he could look at the Chaplain more easily. ‘I think it is. I think that El’Jonson grew to be afraid of Luther, of his popularity amongst the troops, and so left him on Caliban where his star would rise no more.’

‘These are the lies of Luther. They have polluted your mind, as they polluted the others who turned on their brethren.’ Boreas’s denial was absolute, his face set.

‘For all his skills at fiery speeches and impassioned whispers, Luther was never and could never be a Space Marine,’ Astelan pointed out. ‘There were a few who listened to him, most of them of the new Legion. My Space Marines, while having the deepest respect for Luther and his great achievements, had served under the Emperor himself and owed their loyalty to him alone.’

‘And so how did it come to pass that those supposedly loyal Dark Angels turned on their primarch and betrayed the Emperor, if they did not care for Luther’s oratory?’ Boreas asked, stalking forward.

‘Because I stood up beside him and offered him my support,’ Astelan replied in a hushed whisper. Doubt filled his mind for a moment. Had he not done that, would things have occurred differently? He dismissed the thought; the future of the Dark Angels had been set long before that moment.

‘And why did you do that?’ Boreas’s voice cut through his thoughts.

‘So that we could do what we were always meant to do – fight the Emperor’s enemies and force back the darkness that surrounded mankind,’ Astelan said.

‘Explain.’

‘The primarch was far away, continuing the Great Crusade, when we were brought word of terrible news,’ Astelan told the Chaplain. ‘Horus, greatest of the

primarchs, the Emperor's own Warmaster, had turned traitor. Accounts were fragmentary, and infrequent, but slowly we pieced together what had happened. We heard of his virus bombing at Isstvan, and the dropsite massacre. Primarchs and their Legions were turning against the Emperor, and against themselves. It became impossible to tell friend from foe. We heard on more than one occasion that the Dark Angels had turned on the Emperor, or that Lion El'Jonson had been killed. There was talk of the Space Wolves fighting against the Thousand Sons, and of battle-brother killing battle-brother across the galaxy.'

'And so you saw the opportunity to turn traitor as well, to side with Horus,' Boreas accused him.

'We wanted to leave, to go and fight Horus!' Astelan's defiance was weak, his body failing the strength of his spirit. 'We could be sure of nothing except that which was in our own hearts. It was Luther who first spoke of us leaving Caliban and joining the fight to defend the Emperor.'

'Luther would have led you to Horus!' snapped Boreas. 'And what of the Lion's commands? Did the stewardship of Caliban mean nothing to Luther and you?'

'It meant much to Luther, less to me as you might understand,' admitted Boreas. 'But how did we know what our primarch wanted us to do? Communication was shattered, and the intent of the Lion obscured by hundreds of light years and conflicting stories. He could have been embattled on some distant planet, or have sided with Horus, or leading the Emperor's defence, we did not know. And so we took it upon ourselves to divine our own path, for it was the only thing that we could do.'

'So what happened then? What caused the fighting?' Boreas stood close again, his robes and skin bathed in the red light of the brazier, giving him a half-daemonic appearance.

'There were some among our number, newly raised battle-brothers who perhaps slightly lacked the faith and zeal of the old Legion, who opposed our leaving,' Astelan replied.

'And so you attacked them, wiped out the dissenters.' Boreas's face twisted into a snarl as his anger grew again.

'It was they who attacked first, and revealed their treacherous intent with the death of hundreds,' Astelan corrected him. 'We had prepared everything to leave, and were embarking onto the transports to take us into orbit where the battle barges and strike cruisers of the Chapter awaited us. As the ships began to leave, the traitors struck. Their orbiting ships opened fire on ours, they stormed the

planetary defence batteries and opened fire on the transports. Defence lasers blew the transports out of the sky and they rained down in pieces onto us. Some tried to continue into orbit, and they were destroyed by the enemy, while others were blasted into shrapnel as they attempted to land. Their strike was short-lived, however, as we counter-attacked in force. Their ships fled, and those who had taken the batteries were driven out or killed.'

'So they acted to stop you disobeying the primarch's orders,' Boreas suggested.

'They had no right to!' rasped Astelan. 'I have already told you that the primarch's wishes were as unknown to us as the state of the war against Horus. Theirs was the sinful act, firing on us.'

'But you did not leave, did you?' Boreas pointed out.

'We could not,' Astelan said with a sorrowful shake of his head. 'We were afraid of what might happen if we left Caliban in the hands of the treacherous brethren. We could not leave until we were sure that Caliban was safe.'

'And how did you hope to ensure that?' demanded Boreas.

'We hunted them down, of course,' Astelan told him. 'They hid in the deep woods, and struck with hit-and-run attacks, but eventually our numbers took their toll and we thought them exterminated. For three months, our guns were silent and it was then that perhaps we committed the only sin – that of complacency. Thinking our foe destroyed we relaxed our guard as we began to make preparations to leave once more. That was when they struck. They had hidden themselves away more thoroughly than we could have ever imagined, in the most inhospitable places on Caliban. Without warning, they gathered their might and launched an attack on the starport, taking several transports. Stunned, we did not react quickly enough and by the time the defence lasers were active, they were already amongst our fleet and we could not target them for fear of hitting our own ships. They concentrated their attacks on the largest craft in the fleet, my own battle barge, the *Wrath of Terra*. They stormed her, took control, and turned her immense guns and torpedoes on the rest of the fleet. The battle was short-lived, for the *Wrath of Terra* outclassed any vessel in orbit, and soon my Chapter's fleet was reduced to smoking wrecks.'

'And so you were stranded on Caliban, and those who had stayed true to their primarch had finally succeeded in preventing you from joining the Warmaster,' Boreas said, sharing some pride in the desperate act.

'It was not their final act,' Astelan said bitterly. 'They piloted the *Wrath of Terra* into Caliban's atmosphere, where she burned up and exploded into fiery fragments that rained down onto the surface. Plasma reactors trailing infernos

exploded in the forests leaving craters kilometres across and sending dust and rock into the sky to obscure the sun. Fragments crashed into the cities and castles, destroying them, and the largest portion of the ship plunged into the southern ocean, creating a tidal wave that wiped out everything within twenty kilometres of the southern coast. Not only had they marooned us on Caliban, they wrought untold destruction upon the planet that had now become our prison.'

'If what you say is true, then how was it that you fired upon our primarch when he returned?' Boreas said accusingly.

'Caliban was then a ravaged, desolate place,' Astelan continued, his voice dropping to a barely audible murmur. 'The forests died, the life-giving energies of the sun blotted out by the clouds of dirt and ash that hung in the air. The world was slowly destroying itself, because we had failed to protect it from our own battle-brothers. You speak of shame, but it is nothing compared to the guilt we felt at that time, as the trees burned, and the light of the stars was taken from us.'

'But why the attack on the Lion?'

'Luther had taken up residence in Angelicasta, the Tower of Angels, largest citadel on Caliban and greatest fortress of the Dark Angels. I had taken personal command of the outer defences and the laser batteries, from a command centre hundreds of kilo-metres away. When we received a signal that spaceships had entered orbit, we thought at first that the traitor ships had returned – the ones that we had driven off in the first battle.'

'And that is why you opened fire?' asked Boreas.

'No, it is not,' Astelan replied with defiance. 'It soon became clear that our primarch had returned. Luther contacted me to ask for my advice. He was troubled because he had intercepted a communication that claimed El'Jonson himself led the approaching ships. He did not know what to do, fearing the wrath of the Lion for what had befallen Caliban.'

'And what did you tell him?'

'I told him nothing,' Astelan said grimly. 'I gave the order for the batteries to open fire on the approaching ships.'

'*You* gave the command?' spat Boreas, gripping Astelan's throat and pressing him back against the slab. 'It was *you* who precipitated the destruction of our homeworld? And you say that you have no sins to repent!'

'I stand by my decision,' Astelan replied hoarsely, ineffectually trying to prise away the Chaplain's vice-like grip. 'There was nothing else I could do. El'Jonson was going to wipe us out, for I suspected that the traitor ships had met

him, and their version of events would have damned us all. Our beneficent primarch would have had us all killed for what had happened to his homeworld. I also feared that our primarch was no longer loyal to the Emperor. We had heard little of the exploits of the Dark Angels during the Horus Heresy, and I did not discount the thought that this was due to El'Jonson having sided with Horus.'

'So you fired because you were scared of retribution?' Boreas snarled, raising Astelan's head and cracking it back against the stone table.

'I fired because I wanted El'Jonson killed!' spat Astelan, pushing weakly at Boreas to free himself. 'My loyalty was first and foremost to the Emperor, and to El'Jonson a long way second behind that. It was my duty to the Emperor to protect the Space Marines under my command – Space Marines that the Emperor himself had picked and raised, and who were now threatened by this primarch. Do you understand?'

'Not at all, I cannot comprehend the treachery that pulses within your heart,' Boreas said, letting go of Astelan in disgust and stalking away. He did not look at his prisoner as he spoke. 'To turn on your primarch, to wish him dead, is the gravest sin that you could have committed.'

'It was the primarchs who turned on the Emperor. Before their coming there had been no dissent, no civil war,' argued Astelan, pushing himself into a sitting position. 'It was the primarchs who turned the Legions against their true master, who furthered their own ambitions with the thousands of Space Marines under their command. It was the primarchs who nearly destroyed the Imperium, and it was Lion El'Jonson who had doomed Caliban with his own actions.'

'Your arrogance was fuelled by jealousy, lubricated by the dark lures promised by Luther!' Boreas roared at Astelan. 'You turned on your primarch in return for power and domination by the Dark Powers!'

'I defended myself from a madman who had already tried to destroy my Chapter and would not hesitate to do so again!' Astelan snarled back. 'I never swore to any Dark Powers, I was nothing but loyal to the Emperor! But I was also wrong.'

'So you admit it!' Triumph was written across Boreas's face as he swept across the cell towards Astelan.

'I admit nothing.' Astelan's words stopped Boreas in his stride, his elation turning to fury. 'I was wrong in believing that Lion El'Jonson sought a reckoning with me. It was his mentor and friend, Luther, that he was intent on destroying. It was Luther, steward of Caliban, his saviour, that El'Jonson had grown to hate, to envy. His actions prove my point! Did he not personally lead

the attack on the Tower of Angels, while his ships bombarded Caliban from orbit? Was he not seeking to destroy all evidence of his own weakness, striking out at those who had seen him for what he truly was?'

'The Lion had indeed heard of Luther's treachery and knew that to cure the malady, he had to act decisively and swiftly,' explained Boreas. 'He hoped that by striking at Luther, he could save Caliban from his evil influence.'

'When the missiles and plasma came screaming down from orbit, it was all too plain to see the primarch's intent,' Astelan argued. 'The seas boiled, the land cracked and the fortresses tumbled into ruins. I remember the ground lurching beneath my feet, and then tumbling into what seemed like a bottomless pit, before I lost consciousness.'

'And there lies the heart of the evidence against you, the overwhelming proof of your guilt!' Boreas bellowed. 'At the end, as tortured Caliban tore itself apart, your dark masters reached out to snatch you from death. As the world shattered, a great warpstorm erupted over Caliban and spirited you away, along with all those who had turned on the Lion. That is why you are guilty, that is why no amount of justification and argument can convince me of another intent behind your actions. The Ruinous Powers saved you and your kind, and scattered you across time and space so that we might not have our vengeance against you. Luther was as corrupt as Horus, as you all were! Admit this and repent!'

'I shall not!' growled Astelan. 'I renounce every charge you have laid against me! I have been loyal to the Emperor from the day I was first chosen to become a Space Marine, and I will stay loyal to the Emperor until my dying breath! Torture me, probe my mind with witch-powers! I refute your accusations! I see now what has become of the so-called pure gene-seed of Lion El'Jonson! You have become creatures of shadow and darkness, and I do not recognise you as Dark Angels!'

'So be it!' Boreas declared, shoving Astelan back against the slab. 'I shall return, and I shall take up my blades, and my brands, and I shall call for Brother Samiel. Your soul shall know justice, whether you choose it or not. You have chosen the path of suffering, when you could have walked the path of peace and enlightenment.'

Boreas stalked towards the door and wrenched it open.

'Wait!' Astelan called out.

'No more of your lies!' the Chaplain snapped back, stepping through the door.

'I still have more to tell!' Astelan shouted after him.

The Chaplain stopped and turned around.

‘You have nothing more I wish to hear,’ he said.

‘But you have not heard the full story,’ Astelan told him, his voice dropping to a cracked whisper. ‘You have not learned the truth.’

‘I will find out the truth in my own way.’ Boreas turned to leave again.

‘You will not,’ Astelan told him. ‘Now it is your turn to decide, as must we all, which path your life will follow. Go now and return with your warlock and take up your implements of pain, and I will never divulge the secrets I keep within me. Not even your psyker will be able to probe them free from my soul. But if you stay, if you listen, I will freely tell them to you.’

‘And why would you do such a thing?’ Boreas asked, not looking back.

‘Because I wish to save you as much as you wish to save me,’ Astelan said, pushing himself to his feet, gasping as pain flooded his body. ‘Through pain and suffering, you will not hear my words, you will be blinded to the truth. But if you listen, as you asked me to listen, then you will learn many things you would not otherwise unearth.’

‘What inner secrets?’ Boreas turned. ‘What more could you tell me?’

‘An interesting thought, a concern of mine,’ Astelan said, meeting the Chaplain’s gaze.

‘And what is that?’ Boreas asked, stepping back through the door.

‘Though we heard little at the time, and accounts of it afterwards are hard to uncover, I have learned as much as I can about the siege of the Emperor’s Palace and the battle for Terra at the end of the Horus Heresy,’ Astelan explained as hurriedly as his ravaged lungs allowed. ‘It is a stirring tale, I am sure you agree. There are stories of the exploits of the Imperial Fists holding the wall against the frenzied assaults of the World Eaters. There is praise running into hundreds of pages for the White Scars and their daring attacks on the landing sites. There are even accounts, most false I suspect, of how the Emperor teleported onto Horus’s battle barge and the two fought in titanic conflict.’

‘What of it?’ Boreas asked suspiciously.

‘Where in all these tales of battle and heroism are the Dark Angels?’ Astelan replied.

‘The Lion was leading the Legion to Terra’s defence, but faced many battles and arrived too late,’ Boreas said.

‘So, Lion El’Jonson, greatest strategist of the Imperium, who was never once defeated in battle, was delayed? I find that hard to believe.’ Astelan’s strength failed him again and he slumped back against the interrogation slab, his legs buckling under him.

‘And what would you believe, heretic?’ Boreas demanded.

‘There is a very simple reason why Lion El’Jonson did not take part in the final battles of the Horus Heresy.’ Astelan let himself drop to the floor, his back against the stone table, his eyes closed. ‘It is beautifully simple, when you consider it. He was waiting.’

‘Waiting? For what?’ Boreas asked quietly.

Astelan looked into Boreas’s eyes, seeing the curiosity that was now there.

‘He was waiting to see which side won, of course.’

Boreas stepped into the cell, and closed the door behind him.

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## PART FOUR

It took six hours for the crew of the *Saint Carthen* to die. In that time, the desperate heretics launched fourteen counter-attacks on the bridge in an attempt to recapture the control chamber and reactivate the environmental systems. Each assault was met with controlled, deadly salvoes of bolter fire. The chances of the bridge falling would have been slim in the best of situations – as implacable as they were on the advance, the Dark Angels excelled at ruthless defence, stubbornly refusing to give a centimetre of ground to wave after wave of wild-eyed crewmen. With their atmosphere leeching out of opened airlocks and deactivated vents, and contending with the lack of gravity, their assaults failed miserably and over two hundred corpses floated in the vacuum as a testament to their increasingly reckless attacks.

Only when the ship's internal scanners register zero life signs outside the bridge did Boreas consider their position secure. Even then, there was much work to do. For over an hour, the Space Marines swept through the corpse-littered corridors and chambers searching for survivors, or evidence of the Fallen, but they returned empty-handed to the bridge. When they had mustered again, it was Nestor who raised the point that had been nagging at Boreas ever since they had stormed the bridge.

'If this ship belongs to the Fallen, where are they?' the Apothecary asked, turning from a view screen to look at Boreas. 'What makes this ship different from any number of other pirate ships in the sector? Perhaps your information was incorrect, perhaps this slaughter was unnecessary?'

Boreas did not answer immediately. He paced heavily across the bridge to the command chair, the black leather now spattered with blood and shredded with shrapnel and bullet holes. He gazed over the sparking consoles, looked at the

floating corpses and globules of blood rising and falling in the thin atmosphere left in the ship. Was Nestor right? Did the presence of the *Saint Carthen* mean the Fallen were in Piscina after all, or had he over-reacted?

'This ship was once captained by one of the Fallen,' Boreas told the others. 'For nearly a century he waged war against the Imperium from this bridge.'

'But he is not here now,' Nestor said, pushing aside a body and stepping towards the Interrogator-Chaplain. He pointed at the uniform of one of the officers. 'Look at this one. He does not look like a traitor to me. Look at their clothes, the badges and insignia. Imperial badges, Imperial merchant insignia.'

'Of course they have civilian insignia,' interrupted Damas. 'They docked with the orbital station, they sent a shuttle down to Piscina IV. They were hardly likely to be bearing placards proclaiming their traitorous ways.'

'Questions will be asked,' Nestor said solemnly. 'Doubts will be raised.'

'Let them be asked!' growled Zaul from where he was standing next to the breach in the wall, a cloud of bolter casings suspended in the air around him. 'You speak as if we acted wrongly.'

'We fired on an Imperial vessel,' Nestor pointed out. 'We boarded and wiped out the crew of another ship, with no evidence to support our claim.'

'Evidence is inconsequential,' Boreas said, turning from the tattered chair.

'The Inquisition will hear of this, Commodore Kayle will make sure of that,' Nestor sighed.

'No!' snapped Boreas. 'It is their claim against ours. We swore to keep the secret of the Fallen, nobody must learn of it. Nobody! It matters not if we can prove it, because to do so will only declare our shame to the galaxy. We will be crushed, hunted down as heretics, and the Chapter will be destroyed.'

'They were here,' Hephaestus said quietly. He had been busying himself at one of the data consoles for some time. The rest of the command squad turned and looked at him.

'You have found something?' Damas asked, crossing the bridge and looking past the Techmarine at the flickering screens.

'Yes, brother-sergeant, I have,' replied Hephaestus. 'I have found their navigational records. They have been in the system for several months, and have made frequent journeys to Piscina II. One of its moons, to be more precise.'

'Aside from planets three and four, the system is uninhabited,' Thumiel said. 'A secret outpost of some kind?'

'That would be my conclusion,' Hephaestus agreed, looking directly at Boreas. 'I have also found data pertaining to a particular type of power plant, of which

they picked up several before coming to Piscina.'

'And what does that mean?' Damas asked.

'Aside from the fact that nearly all of the ship's power requirements are provided for by its plasma reactor, the pattern of energy cell they brought on board is the same as that used in our own backpacks,' the Techmarine explained. 'An inventory of the ship's armoury and other equipment includes nothing that would require similar power cells. A suit of power armour is the only reasonable explanation.'

'So the Fallen have been aboard,' concluded Boreas.

'At least one, probably several,' Hephaestus added.

'Anything else?' Boreas asked.

'Most of the data storage was erased or destroyed when we took the bridge,' the Techmarine replied with a shake of his head.

'What are your orders?' Nestor asked, shouldering aside a corpse that had drifted into him.

'Damas, contact Sen Neziel, tell him to despatch a Thunderhawk to retrieve us,' Boreas said, straightening up, full of purpose again. 'Order him to load torpedoes for full spread and prepare to target this vessel. Hephaestus, transmit the navigational directions to the *Blade of Caliban*'s bridge crew and have them lay in the most direct course to Piscina II.'

'Do you think destroying the ship will stop any enquiry?' Nestor said with a shake of his head.

'No, but it will destroy any evidence of the Fallen,' Boreas countered. 'We will locate and destroy their base as well, and claim to have rooted out a cadre of renegades.'

'A lie?' Nestor asked.

'A half-truth,' Boreas replied. 'We will leave sufficient evidence that Traitor Marines had been operating in this system. No one will ask which Legion they came from.'

'Do you think that will allay suspicion?' Damas asked.

'We have hunted the Fallen for ten millennia and concealed the true purpose of our quest,' Boreas explained carefully. 'The Inquisition will see what we want them to see. They may have their doubts, but there will be insufficient cause for them to act or inquire further.'

'This makes me uncomfortable,' Thumiel admitted, turning his head to look at each of the others. 'I feel this deception dishonours us.'

'The dishonour is already ours!' rasped Zaul. 'Did you not hear the Brother-

Chaplain's words? Did you not consider the oaths of secrecy we swore? Our past already damns us in the eyes of the Emperor, and we shall never be able to atone for that sin if that shame were discovered. Boreas is right, we would be hunted down as traitors, ten thousand years of service and loyalty tarnished by a moment's weakness. Do you wish the Dark Angels to be remembered in history as heroes, or alongside the likes of the World Eaters and Alpha Legion?'

'Enough of this!' barked Boreas. 'Hephaestus, lead the way to the docking bay, we shall talk of these matters later. First, we must destroy this tainted ship and dispense with Captain Stehr and the *Thor Fifteen*. Then we will track the fiends to their lair and eliminate them. That is our only concern for the present.'

'As you command,' the others chorused.

Boreas stood on the bridge of the *Blade of Caliban* and watched the slowly expanding cloud of gas, plasma and debris that used to be the *Saint Carthen*. He felt relief as he watched the glittering mass dissipating across the backdrop of stars. The feeling went deeper than the elimination of a possible threat did, right to the core of his soul. Since he had first heard the ship's name again after the riot, it had been like a thorn in his mind, a reminder of Astelan. Though he was almost physically incapable of fear, the ship had come to represent something dreadful in the Interrogator-Chaplain's mind. Seeing its destruction exorcised that anxiety, banished the lingering doubts and worries that had plagued him recently.

'Lord Boreas?' the comms officer interrupted his thoughts. 'We are being hailed by Captain Stehr.'

'Very well,' Boreas said with a nod, striding to the communications panel. He activated the speaker. 'Your presence is no longer required, captain, I wish you a speedy and uneventful journey back to orbital dock.'

'This is intolerable!' Stehr's voice ranted back over the link. 'That vessel was a prize of the Imperial Navy, you had no right to destroy it.'

'I not only had the right, but the authority and a duty to do so,' Boreas answered sternly. 'I deemed the continued existence of the traitor vessel to be a threat and have acted accordingly. I do not understand your misgivings.'

'That ship was a legitimate salvage by right of capture,' Stehr protested. 'My crew would have been paid handsomely for recovering her.'

'Service to the Emperor is its own reward,' Boreas replied bluntly. 'Your financial status is not my concern.'

'I shall inform Commodore Kayle of this unprovoked action,' Stehr continued.

‘Not only have you fired upon a vessel of the Imperial Navy, you wiped out an entire ship’s crew and destroyed a prize ship.’

‘I trust you will give Commodore Kayle a full and detailed report of the action,’ Boreas said. ‘Be sure that you include mention of your disregard for my orders not to board the *Saint Carthen*. You should also take pains to tell him how your dis-respectful behaviour has angered me.’

‘You launched torpedoes at us!’ Stehr’s voice was almost a shriek.

‘I launched torpedoes close to your vessel to prevent you coming to further harm,’ Boreas corrected the naval officer. ‘However, I demand that you leave this area immediately and do not attempt further contact with the *Blade of Caliban* otherwise my next torpedo salvo will not be aimed to miss. I will tolerate this insubordination no longer.’

‘I shall see charges brought against you for this,’ Stehr replied. ‘Even if it means I’m brought before a court martial for disobeying orders. I will go to the highest authorities if I have to.’

‘Your threats mean nothing to me, Captain Stehr,’ Boreas replied. ‘We are not of the Imperial Navy, neither Commodore Kayle, nor your admirals or even the Lord Admiral of the segmentum has any authority over us. Even Imperial Commander Sousan does not have authority over us, we answer only to the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels and the Emperor himself. We fight alongside you because we share a common foe, but it is wholly at our discretion how we choose to fight the enemies of the Emperor. And now you are here only at my sufferance, and your continuing prattling threats begin to wear my patience. Your presence here also presents a threat to the security of my vessel and my battle-brothers, and if I do not see you leaving within the next fifteen minutes I shall take action myself.’

Boreas slammed his hand down on the comms rune to cut the link, cracking the wooden panel around it.

‘Power to starboard broadsides, target the *Thor Fifteen*,’ he commanded, and this time the crew acted without hesitation. Several minutes passed before one of the monitoring officers reported the *Thor Fifteen* powering up her plasma engines and picking up speed. Boreas ordered the gun deck crews to stand down and swept out of the chamber, his mood foul.

It would take the *Blade of Caliban* six days to achieve orbit over Piscina II. Boreas felt the time passing slowly. Though the destruction of the *Saint Carthen* had been a deserved victory, they had yet to root out the Fallen themselves.

Boreas was hopeful that whatever diabolic plan they had been trying to enact had been undone with the destruction of their ship. There was no way to be sure though, and the only course of action available to him was to follow the little evidence they had in the hope of finding the Fallen stranded in their base on Piscina II.

But there was another matter he had to address. On the day after the boarding of the *Saint Carthen*, he called his command together again in the briefing chamber.

'You are about to face a foe unlike any you have fought before,' the Interrogator-Chaplain began. 'You have all battled renegades in the past, but to fight the Fallen is to fight against a dark reflection of yourself. Some are utterly depraved, as physically corrupted as a Berzerker or Plague Marine, but others appear no different from you or I. They wear the livery of the Dark Angels Legion, they carry the same symbol upon their shoulder as us. But remember that they are not like us. They are traitors and heretics who turned upon the Lion and the Emperor.'

'This is nothing new to us,' Thumiel said, leaning forward. 'We are ready for them, as we were ready for them before.'

'You may think you are prepared, but you must steel yourselves for the reality,' Boreas warned. 'They will try to talk to you, to appeal to you as brother Space Marines. They will twist the teachings of the Lion, to sow doubt and weaken your resolve. Do not heed their words! Harden yourself to their lies, their falsehoods and warped philosophies.'

'I will hear nothing over the roar of my bolter!' exclaimed Zaul with a snarl. 'Let their corpses try to corrupt us!'

'And therein lies the danger,' Boreas said slowly. 'For the Fallen are not a foe we can execute out of hand.'

'What do you mean?' demanded Hephaestus. 'The punishment for treachery such as theirs is death and damnation.'

'But the quest, this crusade, is not just to erase the evidence of our dishonourable past,' Boreas said, his gaze directed over their heads, as if he could see through the wall to the chapel beyond. 'It is to expunge the sins of the past. It is not enough that we simply kill the Fallen, for the stain on our souls still remains. Yes, they are deserving of death, and we shall be the ones to bring it upon them. But first it is our duty to allow them to repent their sins. Only by offering them salvation for their souls can we hope to achieve forgiveness for ourselves.'

'Salvation?' Zaul almost spat the word out and Boreas looked at him sharply. 'It

is they who brought this curse down upon us, what hope is there of salvation for them? Kill them swiftly and rid the galaxy of their harmful presence and we shall have atoned enough.'

'It is not for us to judge the wisdom of ten thousand years,' Nestor cut in before Boreas could reply.

Zaul looked at Boreas, his expression full of consternation.

'Kill the mutant, the witch, the heretic, the alien,' the battle-brother said stubbornly. 'That is what we were taught.'

'And you have learnt well,' Boreas replied with a faint smile before his expression hardened. 'But now you must learn a new lesson, and learn it quickly. If we encounter the Fallen, they are to be captured alive. We will hold them until the Tower of Angels arrives, and then they will be passed into the hands of my Brother-Chaplains.'

'And then?' Zaul demanded. 'And then they die?'

'Yes, but not before we have laid bare the full extent of their crimes,' Boreas said. 'Not before they have the chance to save their souls by admitting their treachery.'

The others said nothing, guessing rightly what the Chaplain's words implied. The quiet of the briefing chamber was only broken by the background noise of humming power lines, the throb of the engines through the hull and the distant clank of machinery. Boreas looked at Zaul, staring deep into his eyes.

'If it is your will, Brother-Chaplain, that we take the Fallen alive, then it shall be so,' Zaul said eventually, dropping his gaze to the deck.

'It is my will,' Boreas replied.

The display screen of the briefing room flickered and shimmered with an image of the moon's surface. At the centre of a superimposed white grid sprawled the Fallen's base of operations in grainy red monochrome. Unsure what defences protected the renegades' station, Boreas had ordered the *Blade of Caliban* to approach cautiously, edging into orbit a few kilometres at a time, ready to pull back from any fire from the surface. No strike came, and now the rapid strike vessel hung just two kilometres above the moon's thin atmosphere, its augurs and surveyors directed towards the cratered surface.

At the heart of the base, Boreas could make out the blocky, square-nosed shape of a landing craft, some three hundred metres in length and fifty metres wide. The rest of the buildings expanded outwards from the landing craft like a ferrocrete spider web of enclosed walkways and bunkers half buried in flows of

dust and grit. Thin shafts of light spilled from windows and ports.

The others were standing next to the Interrogator-Chaplain examining the image, pointing out features that looked like power generators, comms arrays and surveyor dishes.

'They have no weaponry capable of orbital attack,' Hephaestus said, confirming what Boreas already suspected. 'However, with the scanning equipment of the central ship, boosted by the relays to the sub-stations, I think we must assume they are now aware of our presence, even if they are unable to act.'

'These look like weapons turrets,' Damas said, pointing at three separate emplacements, one on the ship itself and two others in towers a few hundred metres away to form a triangular defence. He traced his finger across the large screen to indicate their converging fields of fire. 'They're positioned well, no easy attack route. Wherever we strike from, they will have us targeted by at least two turrets.'

'They look like energy weapons, am I right?' said Boreas, glancing at Hephaestus. The Techmarine nodded.

'Yes, you can see the armoured power conduits running from relays built into the lander's central engines,' he said. 'Las-cannons, I would say, by their appearance. Given their elevation and the low defraction of the atmosphere they would have an effective range of four or five kilometres, able to hit us as soon as we entered the upper atmosphere.'

'Perhaps an orbital strike to knock out their generators,' suggested Thumiel. 'The target is quite large, I am sure the gunners could hit them from orbit.'

'That would be too risky,' argued Boreas. 'A stray hit could destroy the main structure, burying our prey. Even if the target were struck, there's no way we can tell if a chain reaction wouldn't have equally catastrophic consequences.'

'And they would know for sure what we intended and be ready for us,' added Damas. 'We assume they are aware of us, but we may still hold an element of surprise which would be lost the instant we opened fire.'

'The atmosphere down there is barely breathable by humans, and here on the dark side the temperature will be considerably below freezing,' Nestor observed. 'Perhaps an initial strike to pierce the structure in several places to kill off the majority of any non-Space Marine soldiers will weight the odds in our favour.

'That will not guarantee our success,' Hephaestus said with a shake of his head. 'By its construction, the whole base looks compartmentalised, and each junction is probably sealed. We would have to crack open every part of it first. Also, it is unlikely that the Fallen themselves constructed this on their own, and so their

minions would have to be equipped with environment suits to operate outside the controlled interior. We might kill some of them inside, but we could not strike quickly enough to eliminate them in significant numbers before they suited up.'

'We managed to overpower the crew of a starship,' Zaul pointed out. 'These headquarters are not large enough to accommodate even half the number of men aboard the *Saint Carthen*.'

'We had surprise and a clearly obtainable objective then,' Boreas sighed, turning away from the screen. 'If only this ship were equipped with drop pod bays, we might have been able to launch a shock assault, dropping empty pods as decoys for the turrets. As it is, we will have to go in with a Thunderhawk assault, and we cannot even risk orbital fire support to cover our approach.'

'Perhaps if we land over the horizon and attack on foot?' suggested Nestor. 'The environmental reports indicated about two-thirds Terran gravity. We could cover five kilometres in under ten minutes.'

'If we are detected, the lascannons will be able to pick us off in short order,' Hephaestus warned. 'It will take several hits to disable a Thunderhawk, giving us some measure of additional protection against those batteries. If we had known we were going to be involved in more than a boarding action, we could have brought a Rhino with us. An armoured assault would have allowed us access to the base in relative safety.'

Boreas sat down on the front bench of the auditorium, the wood of the seat creaking under the weight of his armour. He glanced at the screen again and shook his head. The others gathered around him as he pensively stroked his chin.

'There will be no easy way for us to end this quickly and conclusively,' he told them, leaning back. 'However, just like a boarding action, the narrow confines of the corridors and chambers will prevent the enemy being able to use numbers against us. We will strike as hard and fast as we can, gain entry and cleanse the base room by room, passage by passage. Zaul, you will carry a flamer, it will prove invaluable in the close confines. Everybody should take as much ammunition and as many grenades as you can carry. Ready your equipment then I shall conduct the pre-battle prayers in the chapel. Hephaestus, have the crew prepare a Thunderhawk for launch, fully armed.'

'I shall bless the missiles myself,' Hephaestus said with a nod, taking a step towards the door before turning back. 'I think we will need the Emperor, the Machine God and the Lion all to watch over us this time.'

'Their eyes are upon us, and we shall not fail,' Zaul said, touching a hand to the Dark Angels' symbol on his chest. 'Praise the Lion!'

Boreas stood in the cockpit of the Thunderhawk and looked over Hephaestus's shoulder through the armoured canopy. The *Blade of Caliban* had moved to the permanent dayside of the moon before they had launched, and the external environment indicators showed that the interior of the gunship was growing hotter and hotter, though the Space Marines' armour easily protected them from such extreme temperatures. Their plan was to enter orbit out of sight of the enemy base and approach at nearly ground level. They would perform a rapid attack run before turning and landing on the opposite side of the installation, coming to ground as close as possible to the complex.

The bright white of the moon's pockmarked surface almost filled the view from the cockpit, and the gunship began to shudder slightly as the atmosphere thickened. Hephaestus pushed forward on the control column to plunge the nose of the Thunderhawk down, heading at speed towards the surface. Only a few hundred metres from impact, he levelled their flight path and the gunship roared over craters and savage trenches, climbing over the odd low peak and diving into the wide rifts that cracked open the moon's surface.

'Time to attack run, eighteen minutes,' Damas announced from the gunner's position next to the Techmarine.

'Primary targets are those gun towers,' Boreas told the veteran sergeant. 'Secondary targets at your discretion.'

'Understood, Brother-Chaplain,' Damas replied with a firm nod, his gaze not moving from the tactical screen casting its green light onto the face of his helmet.

Boreas walked into the main compartment where the others sat silently on the benches, their weapons check finished. Zaul had his combat knife in his hand and was etching something into the casing of the flamer. Despite the bumping and rolling of the Thunderhawk, his movements were controlled and precise.

'What are you writing?' Boreas asked, sitting next to the battle-brother. Zaul lifted up the flamer for Boreas to see. Carved in neat script were the words, 'Cleanse the Unclean.' Boreas knew the rest of the verse, it was part of a dedication to the Machine God – *Chastise the Unholy with the Sacred Bolt, Cleanse the Unclean with the Fire of Purity, Cleave the Impure with the Blade of Hatred.*

'Armour your Soul with the Shield of Righteousness,' Boreas said, starting the next verse.

'Guard your Heart with the Ward of Honour,' Thumiel continued.

'Strengthen your Arm with the Steel of Revulsion,' Nestor finished the prayer.

Smiling to himself, Boreas took his crozius from the weapons locker beneath the bench. It felt good in his hands, his badge of office as well as a deadly weapon. Fifteen Interrogator-Chaplains before him had carried this crozius; he had learnt their names when he had been presented with it. He wondered for a moment what they had been like, what it had been like to live during the Age of Apostasy and taken part in the crusades that had followed the Conclave of Gathalamor. He felt that such times were coming again. His instincts told him that the rumours, the hearsay, the omens and portents were more than just idle superstition. The very presence of the Fallen so close to a Dark Angels' world could not be mere coincidence. Forces were stirring, in this reality and in the warp, and he could only guess at what part he might play in events yet to come.

Lost in his musings, the time passed quickly and it was a slight surprise when Boreas heard Damas declare they were only a minute from firing range.

'We are detecting some form of scanning field,' Hephaestus announced as the Thunderhawk's instruments scrolled data across half a dozen different screens.

A few seconds passed and then three blinding flashes of white shot out of the darkness ahead, passing below the gunship. Another volley of high-energy las-fire zipped past from a slightly different angle, crossing the path of the Thunderhawk over a hundred metres ahead.

'Let us hope their aim does not improve dramatically,' laughed Damas as he took up the weapons controls. 'Our missiles' machine spirits are becoming aware of the targets,' he added, his voice solemn again.

Another salvo of fire flashed towards them, only a little closer than the first shots had been. Hephaestus steered the gunship even lower until it was barely thirty metres above ground level. The approach was fairly smooth, a slight incline up towards the wide brow of the hill on which the base was built.

'Firing missiles,' Damas announced as he pressed the launch stud. Twin streaks of fire soared away either side of the Thunder-hawk, splitting apart as the tiny metriculator in each warhead guided itself to the designated target. A few seconds later, explosions blossomed to the left and right.

'One target confirmed destroyed,' Damas announced. 'Unsure of the other, definite damage inflicted.'

His answer came only a moment later as two bolts of white energy smashed into the nose of the Thunderhawk, causing the windshield to shatter into a thousand shards and the cockpit consoles to explode with multi-coloured sparks. The gunship lurched to starboard as Hephaestus wrestled with the suddenly unresponsive controls. Boreas and the others were slammed into the side of the

hull. The wing dipped alarmingly and Boreas could feel them rapidly losing altitude.

'Brace for crash!' Hephaestus warned, letting go of the controls and seizing hold of the grab rails set into the hull over the pilot's chair.

The starboard wing clipped an outcrop of rock first, causing the gunship to yaw violently amidst the shrieking of torn metal and roar of exploding engines. Spinning fast, the Thunderhawk smashed into the lip of a crater and flipped, sending the Space Marines inside tumbling over and over as the hull buckled and flames erupted from the severed fuel line where the wings had sheared off. Four times the gunship rolled before skidding to a stop, its nose buried under tonnes of gouged rock. The Space Marines were left in a pile on the floor, Thumiel lying across Boreas's chest, Zaul and Nestor entangled with each other just outside the cockpit.

Ignoring the flickering flames, barely hot enough to start peeling the paint on his armour, Boreas pushed Thumiel away and clambered to his feet. He checked on the others and they reported no serious injuries, just minor damage to their armour and a few bruises.

Boreas forced his way through the tangle of buckled spars and crumpled bulkheads to the exit ramp. The hydraulics were a mangled mess spewing fluid over the decking, and he detonated the explosive bolts that held the ramp closed, giving silent thanks to the Machine God that the emergency mechanism had not been broken in the crash. The ramp cartwheeled away from the gunship before coming to a halt in the score marks carved into the rock by the gunship's crash.

The aft of the Thunderhawk was several metres above the ground, and Boreas had to jump down, his boots throwing up plumes of dust as he landed. He reckoned that they had crashed about a kilometre short of the base's outskirts, but pulled his bolt pistol free all the same and conducted a sweep of the crater's perimeter while the others clambered free of the wreckage. They took up defensive positions around the shattered gunship as Boreas considered what to do next.

'Can you confirm our position?' he asked, looking back at Hephaestus.

'Just under a kilometre in that direction,' the Techmarine answered, pointing towards a part of the crater's rim that was shallower than the rest. 'I have notified the *Blade of Caliban* of the situation and they stand ready for your orders, Brother-Chaplain.'

'We continue with the attacks, advance by pairs,' Boreas said. 'Hephaestus and myself, Zaul and Nestor, Thumiel and Damas. Fifty-metre intervals, Zaul and

Nestor cover the right flank, Thumiel and Damas the left. We must endeavour to gain entry to the closest part of the enemy headquarters, and attack them from within.'

'Understood, Brother Boreas,' Damas acknowledged, tapping Thumiel on the arm and pointing to the left. The sergeant nodded in reply and they set off with long bounding leaps. Boreas led Hephaestus ahead while the other two covered the ground quickly to the right.

In a few moments, they were at the lip of the crater. Boreas looked cautiously over the top and could plainly see the lights of the Fallen's lair against the dark sky. He could also see the silhouettes of dozens of figures advancing across the ground towards their position.

'Attack! Attack!' Boreas bellowed, rising from his position and raising his crozius above his head. The opportunity for subtle plans and complex strategies had been taken from them the moment the Thunderhawk had crashed; now all that they could rely on was their superior weapons and superhuman abilities. 'In honour of the Lion, attack!'

Muzzle flashes sparkled in the darkness as the traitors opened fire, but half a kilometre away their opening shots were wide of the mark. Boreas threw himself forward, covering the ground in five metre strides, preferring to close the range rather than fire. To his left, Thumiel paused and fired several rounds from his bolter, and Damas added his covering fire as well. Fifty metres on, Boreas skidded to a halt and levelled his bolt pistol as Zaul and Nestor advanced to his right. Thumbing the fire selector to semi-automatic, he emptied the magazine in five short bursts, the explosive bolts tearing through a knot of enemy about three hundred metres in front of him.

The Interrogator-Chaplain could see the foe much more clearly now. They wore an assortment of heavy enclosing suits, visors and breather masks, their bulky protective clothing slowing their movements, making them clumsy. They carried a mix of autoguns and light machine guns, spewing tracer bullets out of the night. Having reached their next position to Boreas's right, Zaul and Nestor halted and opened fire, the flickering trails of their rocket-propelled bolts bright in the darkness. Boreas pulled the empty clip from his bolt pistol and tossed it aside, grabbing another from his belt and slamming it home. Glancing to his left he saw Hephaestus on one knee taking aim with his plasma pistol. A searing ball of blue energy erupted from the muzzle, casting flickering shadows as it sped into the chest of a traitor, ripping through his suit and punching out of his back before its energy dissipated.

Bolt shots from ahead and to the left indicated that Zaul and Damas had advanced to their next firing position, and Boreas sprinted forward again, this time snapping off single rounds as he ran. The display imposed over his vision swam with targets, some of them running in his direction, others hunkering down behind boulders and in shallow hollows. Every time the crosshairs glowed red, Boreas squeezed the trigger and another enemy was toppled to the ground a second or two later.

For six hundred metres they advanced in formation, four providing covering fire as the other pair ran forward. Slowly the traitors were driven back before their relentless onslaught. Boreas's audio sensors relayed the crackle of enemy gunfire, and as the range closed, the shots began to strike home, chipping off slivers of ablative ceramite, burying into the plasteel shell beneath. Discarding his fourth empty magazine, Boreas spared himself a second to assess the battle.

Forty to fifty bodies littered the ground between the Space Marines and the nearest outcropping of the traitor base. A few still moved fitfully as those who had survived their wounds suffered oxygen starvation and froze to death because of their ruptured suits. There were still over twenty enemies, more secure in places of cover, firing sporadic salvoes at the advancing Space Marines. More shapes came piling out of the nearby doors, many cut down instantly by a lethal crossfire from Zaul and Thumiel.

'Press on to the buildings,' Boreas ordered, setting off once more, his targeter tracking a traitor as he ran awkwardly around a corner. He snapped off a shot that shattered the man's thigh and spun him to the ground, his gun spilling slowly from his grasp. 'Secure entry immediately. We will eliminate any survivors once we have cleansed the interior.'

Damas headed forward, and the enemy concentrated their fire on him, bullets screaming past the sergeant and ricocheting off his armour. He made it to an entry point a hundred metres ahead to Boreas's left. Pulling a grenade from his belt, he tossed it into the opening and a moment later the explosion billowed out, flinging the ragged corpse of a man at the veteran's feet. Damas disappeared inside, and a few seconds later, his voice crackled over the comm.

'Light resistance encountered,' he reported, the dull crack of his bolter punctuating his words. 'Entry point secured.'

Boreas waved Hephaestus and Zaul ahead, and turned to give covering fire for Nestor and Thumiel as they ran across in front of him. A bullet struck his helmet, cracking through the lens of his helmet's right eye and driving into the bionics behind. A sudden surge of pain flooded Boreas's face and he stumbled

backwards and lost his footing. He just managed to balance himself before he fell completely, but went down on one knee. His head throbbed and his vision swam as he tried to steady himself. The augmetic eye sparked again, burning at him from the inside and he gritted his teeth against the pain. He saw vague shapes running towards him and raised his pistol to open fire.

'Cease fire, Brother-Chaplain!' he heard Nestor tell him and he relaxed his finger on the trigger. His vision still blurred, he saw the pale outline of the Apothecary's armour as he loomed close, one arm outstretched to help Boreas to his feet. Pushing himself upright, he leant on Nestor for a moment while his dizzied senses settled. The pain in his face had gone. He could feel the soothing combat drugs injected into his blood by his armour. His thick blood was already clotting on the wound, but he could feel air leaking out of his helmet. He stumbled a few steps and then regained his balance. He could now make out the doorway where the others were holding position, and broke into a loping run, Nestor beside him.

The interior of the building was narrow, only wide enough for them to advance one at a time. Damas held the far end of the corridor, bolt pistol in his hand. Hephaestus stood a little way behind him, astride a pile of suited bodies.

'Zaul and Thumiel are holding junctions ahead,' Damas reported. 'Still encountering only light resistance.'

'It's almost deserted,' Thumiel added. 'The rooms we have swept were bare.'

'You think they have evacuated and left behind a rearguard?' Boreas asked, an uneasy feeling growing in his subconscious.

'Not just deserted, Brother-Chaplain,' Thumiel replied. 'Bare. Completely empty, as if there was nothing in them in the first place.'

'That makes no sense,' Nestor said. 'A facility of this size could house several hundred men.'

'Perhaps this is a new addition to the complex,' suggested Hephaestus. 'Not yet finished. It is at the outer reaches of the station after all.'

'Hold position,' Boreas told them, giving himself time to think.

His mind was still reeling from the gunshot to his head and it took him a few moments to collect his thoughts. Pulling the auspex from his belt, he set the scan to maximum range. At full power, it would not provide detailed information but it would confirm or deny his growing suspicions. It took several seconds for the power pack to warm up, and the screen hazed into life. There were a few vague patches of brightness to indicate life forms, but it was a very low signal. The silence from outside attracted his attention and he looked back through the door.

Looking left and right, he could see nothing except rapidly cooling bodies. The twenty or so rebels who they had pushed through were nowhere to be seen.

'The base is all but deserted,' Boreas announced, shutting down the auspex and hanging it back on his belt. 'It matters not whether it is because it has been evacuated or because it has yet to become fully operational. We must get to the control chamber as quickly as possible. With the Lion's blessing we will find answers there.'

'What of the cleanse?' asked Damas.

'There is next to nothing to cleanse!' snapped Boreas, exasperated by this unlikely turn of events. 'Make all speed to the central craft, sweep aside any resistance and press through.'

'Affirmative, Brother-Chaplain,' Damas replied. 'Thumiel, Zaul, lead the way.'

As they advanced, Boreas saw just how accurate Thumiel's brief report had been. There was nothing at all in the corridors they ran through, or the chambers they passed, just bare grey ferrocrete. There were no stains, no litter, no furnishings or anything else to indicate that this place had been lived in. Only the dim glow-globes overhead betrayed the fact that the area they were passing through was even wired in to the main power generators. Sporadic bolter fire from ahead occasionally broke the quiet, and as he continued, Boreas passed the odd vacuum-suited body missing a limb, head or chest. Glancing down the side passages they passed, Boreas realised that many were barely finished: the whole base looked as if it had been flung together in a short space of time and then left.

It was only when the drab grey walls turned to tarnished metal that Boreas realised they had passed into the body of the landing craft at the centre of the web of corridors and rooms. Crude paintings and mottos had been daubed onto the walls. Stopping to examine them, Boreas felt his stomach tighten as he realised that they were poor imitations of the great murals of the central chapel in the Tower of Angels. Poorly rendered black figures striding through gaudy yellow flames looked like the painting of the Cleansing of Aris.

'This is a mockery!' declared Zaul, as they gathered in a circular chamber. The ceiling was layered with flaking paint, the peeled picture a clumsy reproduction of the Salvation of the Lion, depicting the Dark Angels primarch in the dark woods of Caliban, surrounded by knights. A figure of pure white was holding out his hand to the half-feral man. Boreas snorted in disgust when he recognised the figure as Luther, made out to be an angelic saviour.

'This borders on the worst kind of desecration,' Zaul rasped, raising his bolter and firing into the mural. Splinters of metal and sprays of dust cascaded down

onto him, covering his bone-coloured armour in a fine layer of speckled colours. ‘Such barbarity cannot be tolerated!’

‘The Fallen did not paint these,’ Boreas said, gazing up at the scarred scene above. Like the first, it was not simply crude in its technique, but in composition and proportion. Only their actual content bore a vague resemblance to the paintings they imitated. ‘Any one of us, though not artists, could replicate the great chapel more accurately. These were crafted by those who have never seen the originals. They were painted by the Lutherites’ servants, based on descriptions and their masters’ memories.’

‘Why?’ Zaul demanded, swinging around to face Boreas, smoke still drifting from the muzzle of his bolter.

‘As worship,’ snarled Boreas. ‘They idolise the Fallen, they have been corrupted by them and now worship not only them, but the twisted ideals they represent.’

‘We should not tarry here,’ Damas interrupted. ‘You said to proceed to the control centre.’

‘It should be that way,’ Hephaestus said, pointing ahead and to the left. ‘There should be a direct route from the central passages, just turn left when we reach a main corridor.’

‘Proceed with more caution,’ Boreas ordered, remembering the scattered concentrations of life signals the auspex has detected. ‘The Lutherites could still be here.’

With one last glance at the heretical paintings, Zaul set off, Thumiel close behind him.

About a hundred metres further in, they came across a wide junction, with passages leading off in eight directions. One was obviously the route to the landing craft’s control centre, its walls daubed with all manner of graffiti deifying Luther and extolling the feats of the Fallen. The armoured doors at the far end were open, and Boreas caught glimpses of movement inside.

Thumiel had already seen it and moved forward quickly, bringing up the muzzle of the flamer. Two quick strides took him to the doorway and he opened fire, a sheet of flame engulfing the inside of the control room. High-pitched screams mingled with the crackling of the flames and a burning figure flailed into view. Damas’s bolt pistol roared once and the flaming man’s head exploded, hurling his carcass back into the room.

‘We need a prisoner for information!’ Boreas yelled as the rest of the squad launched themselves forward, weapons ready. ‘Take one alive.’

As he burst into the chamber, Boreas saw that it was high and narrow, filled with banks of scorched, dead consoles, pools of burning flamer fuel scattered across the floors and walls. Charred and smoking bodies were scattered across the floor, crouched behind panels and chairs where the traitors had tried to take cover. Several still writhed around on the ground, howling in agony or their faces wracked with noiseless screams.

A few had survived and opened fire, shotgun shells and bullets smashing into Thumiel, the first who had entered. Zaul returned fire from behind his battle-brother, his fusillade smashing apart display panels, gouging through banks of dials and readouts and ripping through the bodies of three of the Fallen's servants.

There were two others alive, and Boreas quickly took them down with shots to their legs. Like the others, they were dressed in drab environment suits, their eyes wild behind the tinted visors of their face masks. One tried to raise his autogun to fire again, but before his finger closed on the trigger, Nestor had pulled out his combat knife and hurled it into the man's shoulder, causing the weapon to tumble from his grasp.

Boreas holstered his pistol and strode towards them. They tried to crawl away, and backed up against a workstation topped with a cracked and sparking comms unit. Boreas grabbed the nearest by the pipe of his breather and dragged him up so that he was dangling off the ground. The other started inching away until Boreas stood on his injured leg, pulverising the bone and ripping a muffled scream from the man.

'*External address*. Where are they?' demanded Boreas, the skull visage of his helm a hand's breadth from the man's face.

He shook his head dumbly, his eyes casting to the left and right, but there was no avenue of escape, only five more vengeful Space Marines.

'Answer me!' Boreas yelled, the speakers in his helmet amplifying his words to a deafening bellow that caused the man to shake in the Chaplain's grip. 'What is your name?'

The prisoner glanced down at the other survivor, who shook his head vehemently.

'Don't say anything!' the man on the ground gasped through his breather. 'Remember our oaths!'

Boreas put the man down and pushed him back so that he was sprawled over the comms unit. Holding him there with one hand, he turned to the other rebel. He reached down and grabbed the man's shattered ankle and lifted him up like a

child.

'Your friend will die quickly,' Boreas said, swinging his arm back and then forward, dashing the man's head against the bottom of the workstation, his neck snapping violently. Tossing the corpse aside, the Interrogator-Chaplain placed his hand around the throat of the lone survivor, crushing the air pipe of the breathing mask. 'You will die slowly.'

'Es… Escobar Venez!' the traitor shrieked. He fought lamely against the implacable strength of the Space Marine's grip for several seconds before giving up and flopping backwards again.

'I am Interrogator-Chaplain Boreas of the Dark Angels Chapter,' Boreas told him. 'I have the skill to cause a Space Marine to writhe in agony and tell me his deepest secrets, his darkest fears. It will take me mere moments to make you talk. There is no point resisting.'

'I don't want to die,' Venez said.

'It is too late for that,' Boreas told him. 'All that remains to be determined now is whether you die slowly and painfully, or you tell me everything I want to know and your torment will be ended quickly.'

'If I talk, it will be quick?' the traitor asked. Boreas nodded once.

Tears began to gather in Venez's face mask, welling up in the eye plates. He looked at Boreas, and then at the others, and then back at Boreas. With a sob, he gave a shallow nod. Boreas released him and stepped back. Glancing back, he saw Damas and Thumiel at the door, ready for attack. Zaul stood close by, intent on the prisoner, his bolter aimed at the man's midriff. Hephaestus and Nestor stood a little further away.

'Where are your masters?' Boreas asked again.

'They left, a long time ago,' Venez told him. 'Twenty, maybe twenty-five days ago.'

'Where are they now?' Boreas said, leaning forward again, resting against the broken panel, towering over the rebel.

'I don't know for sure,' Venez replied. Boreas leaned closer, and Venez shrunk back. 'Piscina IV! They were heading to Piscina IV on the ship.'

'Which ship?' Zaul snapped from behind Boreas.

'The *Saint Carthen*,' said Venez, his stare not moving from the death-faced Chaplain.

'What are they doing on Piscina IV?' Boreas asked, trying to keep calm. Inside, he was furious and full of trepidation. As he had feared all along, his actions had taken him further and further from his prey, not closer.

‘I don’t know the details,’ confessed Venez. ‘But I overhead the masters talking about some sort of code – a failsafe code.’

‘A failsafe code for what?’ Boreas demanded. ‘What did they need the code for?’

‘I don’t know!’ screamed Venez, looking away and scrunching his eyes closed. ‘Something to do with your keep, that’s all I know.’

‘Tell me everything!’ Boreas hissed.

‘I don’t know what they planned, I swear!’ the prisoner begged. ‘The *Saint Carthen* took them to Piscina, and they knew you would chase it and not stop them.’

‘What else?’ Boreas asked, his skull-masked face a few centimetres from Venez’s.

‘They were going to wait for you to leave and go to your keep, that’s all I know,’ Venez sobbed. ‘We were to delay you as long as possible. This whole outpost is just a ruse, to fool you and lure you further from them.’

‘Who are they, what are their names?’ Boreas demanded, Venez flinching at every word.

‘Two groups… They came in two groups,’ Venez babbled. ‘We followed Lord Cypher, but we met others who came with the *Saint Carthen*. Sometimes they argued with each other, I think they had different plans. We didn’t see them very often, they never spoke much when we were around. I don’t think Lord Cypher knows about the failsafe plan, I think he is after something else in your keep. That’s all I know, that’s everything!’

Boreas’s hand moved fast, his fingers driving through Venez’s ribcage and rupturing his heart. Blood bubbled up his face as he slid to the ground. He thrashed around for a few seconds before his movements became more feeble, his accusing eyes locked on the Chaplain.

‘Promises to traitors have no validity,’ Boreas snarled before turning away. ‘Die in pain.’ Venez’s fingers flapped ineffectually at the Interrogator-Chaplain’s boot before he slid sideways and sprawled across the metal floor.

‘We must leave now,’ Hephaestus said heavily, stepping close to Boreas.

‘Did you understand what he was talking about?’ Boreas asked. Hephaestus looked away, saying nothing. ‘Tell me!’

The Techmarine took a few paces away and then turned back to face them. They were all looking at him, even the two Space Marines at the door,

‘The failsafe is a device built into the vaults of the keep,’ the Techmarine explained, looking at his battle-brothers. ‘It’s called the annihilus. After the

fighting over the basilica with the orks, it was decided when the new keep was constructed that it should never be allowed to fall into enemy hands. Since the only way the keep would fall were if the rest of the Piscina IV was also subjugated, it was also intended to deny the planet to any invader.'

'What do you mean?' Boreas asked, full of foreboding. 'How does this failsafe device deny a whole planet to the enemy?'

'It's a virus weapon,' Hephaestus answered flatly, staring directly at Boreas. His expressionless helmet told Boreas nothing, but the tone of the Techmarine's voice spoke volumes of the fear he was feeling now.

Boreas was stunned. He was about to say something and then stopped, the words meaningless. He tried to encapsulate his feelings, communicate the dread and the anger that was welling up inside him, but there was no way to express them.

'The keep under my command, our outpost on that world, contains a device designed to wipe out every living thing on the planet,' Boreas said flatly. He felt fatigued and numb. 'And I was not told of this?'

'You were not supposed to know of its existence unless it was absolutely necessary,' Hephaestus replied. 'The Grand Masters were quite specific with their orders.'

'And yet the Fallen, the worst of our enemies, came by this knowledge!' Boreas roared, striding towards the Techmarine. He yanked his crozius from his belt and thumbed the stud, its head blazing with cold blue light. Nestor's hand closed around his wrist as he swung his arm back for the strike.

'This will solve nothing,' the Apothecary said quietly. 'Inquiry, and if necessary justice, can wait until we have averted this disaster.'

Boreas stood there for a moment, Nestor's words seeping through the rage that boiled within his mind. Relaxing, the Chaplain nodded and the Apothecary released his grip. Boreas looked at the crozius, at the winged sword of its head. With a wordless snarl, he let it drop to the floor.

'Signal the *Blade of Caliban* to send a Thunderhawk, Brother-Techmarine,' he snarled and stalked towards the door, leaving the crozius on the floor next to the dying Venez.

# THE TALE OF ASTELAN

## PART FIVE

The former Chapter commander gathered his thoughts before he started, pushing himself back up onto the table. He spoke slowly, purposefully, his voice betraying none of his physical and mental frailty.

'You can disregard everything I have told you, if you wish. It is a remarkable tale, I cannot deny that, and one you might find hard to accept. If you cannot recognise my arguments on the strength of what you have already heard, then your masters have trained you well, and your loyalty does you credit. But your loyalty is misplaced. It is devoted to those who are undeserving of it. Your only loyalty is to the Emperor and to mankind, never forget that. Consider that fact when you listen to what I tell you now. Of the many truths I have to reveal to you, this is the most important. The Dark Angels considered themselves damned by the shame of the events of the Horus Heresy. They are wrong. Their damnation began when Caliban was rediscovered, and Lion El'Jonson took command of the Legion.'

Astelan paused and watched Boreas's face. It was as expressionless as ever, his stare dark and intense.

'Continue,' the Chaplain said.

'For ten thousand years, the Dark Angels have sought to atone for what happened on Caliban. This I learned from Methelas and Anovel, and you have confirmed it through your own actions and words. You have shrouded yourselves in secrecy, suppressed all knowledge of those events, and eliminated all evidence that the Fallen exist. Even within your own ranks, you have created tiers of secrecy so that even the battle-brothers of the Chapter are unaware of their true origins. Like a coven of malcontents, you whisper to each other in the shadows. You conspire to carry out your quest away from the eyes of others. A veil of

shadow covers everything you do.

'It is not because of the Horus Heresy, it is not because Luther and I, and others like us, fought with our own brethren. It is not because the shame of our sins must never been known to others. All of these are excuses, fabrications, justifications to hide the truth. And the truth is so simple, it is shocking. There was a darkness within Lion El'Jonson. A darkness you all carry within you. It surrounds you, yet you are blind to its presence. Intrigue, secrets, lies and mystery: this is the legacy of your primarch.'

'And what makes you think this?' Boreas asked.

'It is a long explanation, but listen to it in its entirety,' Astelan told him. 'It begins before the dawn of the Age of Imperium. Ancient Earth suffers from discord and anarchy as the Age of Strife engulfs mankind. A visionary sees the way to lead humanity out of the darkness, devises a way to guide man back to the stars. We know him only as the Emperor, and He is far from an ordinary man. Creating an army of superior warriors He subjugates the barbarian tribes that dominate Ancient Earth and creates a new society, that of Terra, the foundation of the Imperium He plans to build. Though His warriors are strong, fast, intelligent and loyal, He strives even further to perfect His vision, and creates the beings known as the primarchs. This I learned as a Chapter commander of the Dark Angels.

'The primarchs were the perfect creations, far superior to any mortal man, wholly unnatural in their birth but imbued with altered genes that would make them matchless in the galaxy. Quite what the Emperor intended will never be known, for the primarchs were taken from Him, in much the same way as you say those of us who sided with Luther were taken from Caliban. The Emperor, perhaps, thought them lost, or maybe he knew that they were out there in the galaxy, awaiting rediscovery. The primarchs could not be recreated, or the Emperor was unwilling to try, and He founded the Space Marine Legions instead. Using what gene-seed He had remaining of the primarchs, He created us, the Dark Angels, and the other Legions, and so the First Founding was complete.

'The Great Crusade began and we swept out into the stars on a great war of conquest. As planets fell to us, or were brought back into the fold of the growing Imperium, we raised new warriors and created new Space Marines from that same gene-seed, and thus the Legions were kept at full strength.

'Over time, the primarchs were rediscovered. They had not been slain, but instead had been flung to the corners of the galaxy, awakening as infants on

human-settled worlds. Here they eventually grew up in human society, and were rediscovered by the Emperor and the Legions which had been created from them. Each was given command of the Legion that bore their gene-seed, and the Great Crusade continued.

'Much of this is known to you, I am sure. However, there amongst the legends, you can still see the evidence of what I am about to tell you. Some of the primarchs were flawed. It might have been that their gene-seed was not as perfect as the Emperor thought, or perhaps the dark powers had gained influence over them while they were separated from the Emperor. But there is another, much simpler explanation.

'The primarchs and their Legions became as one. Their gene-seed was used directly to raise new Chapters for the Legions, and they became the commanders. Their personality and that of their homeworld was indelibly etched on to the Legions, so that their battle-brothers became but lesser reflections of their primarchs. They, of course, shared a common homeworld, their people had raised the primarchs as their own. Still, this does not explain fully the effect the primarchs would have on the Legions they commanded.

'The reason, I believe, that the primarchs and their Legions became as one with each other is because the primarchs learned how to be human from their homeworlds. When Leman Russ awoke on Fenris, he found himself on a savage ice world ruled by barbarian warriors. He grew up to be fiercely loyal, impetuous and unorthodox, just like those who had raised him. When Roboute Guilliman became an adult on Macragge, he had been tutored in life by statesmen, strategists and leaders of society, and was famed for his organization, from the greatest sweeping plan to the smallest detail. Think about it. The primarchs had to *learn* how to be human.

'Perhaps it was unavoidable, or perhaps it had always been the Emperor's intent to raise and educate them as his own sons. Whatever the cause, the primarchs, for all their skill, strength, speed and intelligence, were a blank slate. They learned well and they learned quickly, but at the heart of the matter is the fact that they had to learn how to be humans.

'You and I are Space Marines, and we are something far above and beyond a normal human. Our bodies bear only a physical resemblance to those of normal humans, for inside us the gene-seed and implanted organs have turned us into something far from normal men. We were not chosen on our physical suitability alone. We, like the primarchs, are intelligent, dextrous and quick of mind, and a decade of training and a lifetime of battle have honed those skills. It is said that

we know no fear, and it is true, for the kind of fear a man suffers from is alien to us. We are incapable of the passion that humans speak so highly of in poems and sagas. We are no longer humans, the way we are created ensures that. It is a sacrifice, for mankind's own humanity makes it vulnerable, makes it susceptible to betrayal, to doubt, to despair and destructive ambition. We are beyond such weaknesses, and yet we will never again truly be part of humanity, we will never again be one of the creatures we have been created to protect.

'But even with that great catalogue of changes that marks us as far superior, and sometimes far weaker, than normal humans, we are still closer to mankind than the primarchs ever were. They were wholly artificial, never having had a true mother and father. We Space Marines, you and I, were once human. No matter what the training, no matter what they do to our bodies, no matter how much a lifetime of battle hardens us to it, at the core of us lies that humanity. It will never surface wholly – it is suppressed, buried far beneath our conscious recognition of it – but in our hearts and in our souls we were once and still are human, something the primarchs never had.'

'So what does that mean for Lion El'Jonson?' Boreas asked. 'He was raised by Luther, amongst the loyal, courageous knights of Caliban.'

'The very aptitude the primarchs had for learning, for adapting to those around them and their environment was their downfall. Lacking basic, unalterable humanity, they were just replicas. Physically perfect, intellectually without peer, but spiritually vacant. From the moment they awoke, they started learning, started shaping themselves into what they would become. Those around them helped this process, taught them the values they would hold dear to them for their rest of their lives. The primarchs learned their moral values from the cultures they were raised in; they learnt how to fight, how to lead and how to feel from others.'

'I still fail to see the relevance,' Boreas said with a shake of his head.

'In some, that learning was perhaps a semblance of what the Emperor intended. Roboute Guilliman was the greatest of the primarchs, and never once wavered in his dedication and service. But he was inferior to Horus in every way. He was not as able-minded, nor as charismatic, and not as physically adept. Why was it that Horus turned to the powers of Chaos, perfect as he supposedly was, when Guilliman, his inferior, is still renowned ten thousand years later as the shining example of a primarch?

'It is because Guilliman had learned incorruptibility. For whatever reason, from whatever source, Guilliman had shaped his mind to make it impregnable to the

lure of power and personal ambition. He said Space Marines were unsullied by self-aggrandisement, and he spoke truly for he took all Space Marines to be as worthy as himself. Horus, somewhere in his upbringing, had learned a fatal weakness, a chink in the armour of his soul that allowed him to consider himself greater than the Emperor. He turned against his master, as did those who also had such flaws, and eventually Horus was killed and the others driven into the Eye of Terror where they stay to this day, nursing their flaws, reinforcing their prejudices.'

Boreas considered Astelan's words. 'I still have yet to hear anything to indicate why Lion El'Jonson could be to blame for the fall of the Dark Angels. If what you say is true, and the Lion was flawed, then it is the fault of Luther, the man you claim to be the Dark Angels' vanquished saviour. If Luther had raised Lion El'Jonson in the correct way, then it was Luther who turned from the Emperor, and thus it is still his sin.'

'That would be true, but for one thing,' Astelan continued. 'Our primarch, the great Lion, commander of the Dark Angels, was imperfect when Luther saved him from the guns of the Caliban hunting party. He had awoken in the deeps of the Caliban forests. They were wild, dangerous places, swathed in near-darkness, where the sun penetrated the canopy only rarely. In the shadows lurked terrifying, mutated creatures that could kill a man with a single bite of their monstrous jaws or a swipe of their lethal claws. There they stalked and hunted each other, a vicious play of predator and prey.

'This is the world that Lion El'Jonson grew up in and learned from. He learned that the dark shadows could hold hidden dangers, but also that they gave sanctuary. He became a creature of darkness, a thing that avoided the light, for it made him vulnerable and exposed him to danger. When Luther found him, El'Jonson was completely feral, incapable of speech, little more than an animal. He found a hunter, and also the hunted.

'It mattered not what Luther taught him, how well he raised him, what values he passed on to his adopted son. Although on the outside the Lion became a cultured, eloquent, intellectual man, on the inside he was still that hunted, fearful creature. The flaw was already there, it simply became covered with layers of civilization and learning.

'And so there was conflict in the heart of the great primarch. Though I once cursed his name and wished him dead, I have grown beyond such feelings now. One cannot hate the primarchs for what they are, any more than one can truly hate the orks for being alien warmongers, or a gun for shooting you. They are

simply what they have been created to be. We come to loathe their actions, to abhor what they represent, as I have come to loathe and abhor the primarchs for what they became and what they did. But it is the symptom we hate, not the disease; it is the effect we despise, not the cause.'

'A fanciful theory, but that is all,' Boreas said. 'Theories are not the truth, and that is what you promised I would hear.'

'Is it proof that you require? Will your doubts be swept away with evidence? If that is the case, then we shall leave the theories for now, and you shall hear the end, or really the beginning, of my tale.'

Astelan took a deep breath and stretched his aching, scarred limbs. He pushed himself off the slab and bent down to refill the goblet with water and took a long draught. Boreas watched him with his unbreaking stare, his eyes never wavering from Astelan's face, perhaps trying to divine the truth from his expression alone.

'When we first learned that our own primarch had been found, we were overjoyed,' Astelan continued, leaning with his back to the stone table. 'It was like a long lost forefather returning to us from the grave, and in many ways that is a literal truth rather than a useful analogy. Part of him was used to make us, and we owed much of what we were to him. It was another two years of fighting before I could take my Chapter to Caliban itself and meet our great commander, but the encounter was pleasant. More than pleasant, it was reassuring. We had once fought for the Emperor himself, and now we had a new commander. It had been a time of uncertainty, for though we trusted the Emperor implicitly, and if he gave command of the Dark Angels to Lion El'Jonson it must have been the right thing to do, we were unsure of the implications.

'But when I met our primarch for the first time, when he gripped my shoulder and looked into my eyes, my fears were banished. Only the eyes of the Emperor himself held more wisdom than that immortal gaze. Dark, penetrating, all--seeing, the Lion's eyes stared into your soul. If only then I had seen the madness that lay behind that intensity, history may well have been very different. But perhaps not. Perhaps even if I had somehow cut him down on the spot, it would have been too late. His legacy had already been bequeathed to the Dark Angels for ten thousand years.

'It is hard to explain what one feels when in the presence of a primarch. Even I, a hardened Chapter commander of the finest Legion, felt awed and humbled. It is not unsurprising that the legends tell of how normal men were known to faint in their presence. The Lion exuded power and intelligence, every action was perfectly executed, every word perfectly considered. Far from being afraid, I was

inspired. It had been many long years since the Emperor had truly led us, for the Imperium had grown vast in that time and his labours and cares had grown in proportion. So, standing in front of our primarch, feeling his raw strength like a heat that prickled my skin, I swore a new oath of allegiance, to the Emperor, to humanity, to the Dark Angels and to Lion El'Jonson.

'The Great Crusade was at its height then, and I spent only a few days on Caliban, marvelling at its beauty. Our primarch was a reflection of his homeworld, I realise now. The surface was breathtaking, but underneath lived darkness.

'My Chapter returned to the fore of the expanding frontier of the Imperium, and we continued to battle against the foes of mankind, pressing further and further into the darkness. It was then that things started to change. Slowly, subtly, the influence of the Lion was being felt and the Legion altered in accord. When we had fought for the Emperor, we had virtually free rein. We had a mandate, a destiny to fulfil, and we understood implicitly what was expected of us. It is the same vision that I spoke of earlier, and I can see now why you find it so difficult to understand. You who were not there, who did not hear the Emperor's speeches, who did not swear allegiance in front of the Emperor himself, will never understand. That destiny is a part of me as much as my secondary heart.

'Where once the Emperor had sent us forth in the knowledge that his will was our will, now our primarch introduced greater controls. At first it seemed eminently appropriate, after all he was indeed a strategic genius and with him to co-ordinate our efforts surely there was nothing that could stop us. But slowly, year after year, more power was taken from the Chapter commanders to act independently, to devise their own course of action. More and more, the Lion held the reins of the Legion tight.

'It was then that an incident occurred which began to stir my suspicions. It was nothing much, on the face of it. My Chapter had dropped from the warp into a particular star system and we were making our way towards its core to see if there were any inhabitable worlds. As we approached the inner planets our scouts sent back word of another fleet on a closing course. We moved to battle stations to prepare for immediate attack, and we began to manoeuvre to gain the best advantage. When I was happy that our fleet held the upper hand, I gave the order to attack. Very dearly that order could have cost us, if it had not been for the alertness of the captain of one of our ships in the vanguard. He refused the order to open fire and urgently reported back. The enemy fleet was no enemy at all! We were about to engage the ships of the Twenty-third Chapter, under

Commander Mentheus.

‘The near-catastrophic attack was aborted, and no more was said about it, but I began to think. Why had Mentheus been there? Why would El’Jonson have sent two fleets to the same system? I thought perhaps that at first our primarch had made a mistake. But that was impossible, the exactitude of his planning and co-ordination was one of the Lion’s greatest strengths. He never made mistakes of that nature. That left the possibility that Mentheus or myself were in error, but after conferring with each other, we were both in agreement that we were following our specific orders.

‘That left only the possibility that Lion El’Jonson had intended for us both to be there. I could think of no reason why two Chapters had been required, the system was uninhabitable. There had been nothing to indicate a threat worthy of two Chapters, both recently refreshed and at full strength.

‘There was no reason I could think of, and for a while I ignored the thoughts that had begun to nag at my subconscious, until they took me onto a new track. The fact that we were both heading to the same system had not been communicated to me. What was more worrying, perhaps, was that our primarch had not seen fit to even tell me that we were fighting in the same sector, though Mentheus had been well-informed. This made me realise that, with the primarch’s greater control over every Chapter, the communication between Chapter commanders was virtually non-existent. At the dawn of the crusade, we would regularly confer to devise strategy, to co-ordinate our efforts for the maximum chance of victory and success. Now, we received our orders and simply followed them.

‘It was as if El’Jonson was attempting to isolate us. The fear and distrust that had been ingrained into his soul during his infancy was turning to paranoia, perhaps. The instinct for survival on the most basic level was now twisted with the teachings of Luther and the upbringing Lion El’Jonson had received. Where once he saw enemies and prey in the shadows, now he saw them again but in the galaxy around him. I think that our primarch began to fear us, and that through no fault of his own he began to see everything around him as a threat.

‘I resolved to counter some of this growing isolation and made more vigorous inquiries. My suspicions were still not aroused at this point, I merely saw a problem developing and sought to avoid it. As I gathered more information, the picture became more clear. Each of the old Chapters, those founded before the rediscovery of Caliban, had a shadow, a new Chapter, founded on Caliban with Lion El’Jonson’s own gene-seed, within five sectors or less of it. You could

argue that this was coincidence, or more likely for mutual support, and I would agree were it not for the fact that many of the new Chapter commanders seemed to be aware of the presence of the old Legion, but the commanders who had served alongside me throughout the Great Crusade rarely knew of the proximity of their companions. We were being watched.

'Perhaps you now think that it was I who was afflicted with paranoia, and not the primarch at all. Perhaps you are right, perhaps his taint had somehow touched me, and I must stress to you that at this time I had no real concerns, no genuine grievances, just a disquieting feeling, an instinct that something was wrong. That instinct began to focus when I made another discovery. Our primarch was always lauded for his activity, for fighting on the front line of conquest even while directing the resources of his entire Legion. But it appeared that his attention was not evenly spread across the Legion.

'For a primarch who was said to love his homeworld more than any mortal inhabitant of Caliban, the facts painted a curious picture. Rather than an understandable, though still worrying, favouritism for the Chapters who shared the world of his birth, the Lion actually spent more time leading the old Legion Chapters. Though two-thirds of the Dark Angels were now from Caliban, our primarch accompanied those Chapters less than a quarter of the time.

'I came to a shocking and inevitable conclusion: the primarch of the Dark Angels, our commander, did not trust us!'

Astelan stopped there to allow the import of what he was saying to sink into Boreas's thoughts, but the Interrogator-Chaplain's expression did not change. It was as if nothing Astelan was saying had even the slightest meaning for the Chaplain at all.

'Do you not understand?' the former Chapter commander asked.

'Explain it to me more clearly,' Boreas replied.

'We were the Dark Angels! We were the first, the best of the Emperor's Legions! The Emperor himself oversaw our founding, our training and our wars. We were the finest warriors in the Imperium, none had conquered more, and none had showed more zeal in battle and more dedication to their duties. And now our primarch did not trust us!

'It hit me like a shot and the realisation stunned me. I see now why perhaps you cannot understand. You have been raised by the children of Lion El'Jonson, and his legacy is within you, so that distrust and secrets are second nature to you. Not me! I sought desperately for some other rationalisation, to offer myself some alternative conclusion, but there was nothing else that could explain the actions

of our primarch.

‘And still, I never once doubted the Lion. I did not think the blame was his, I did not realise that it was his madness, his mistrust that had led to this. My first thought was that perhaps he had just cause, that perhaps the old Legion was failing in some way. Maybe we were not aware of it, but perhaps we fought less valiantly under El’Jonson than when we fought for the Emperor himself. Perhaps our achievements matched poorly to those of the new Chapters. Perhaps our attention to our duties had diminished in some fashion.

‘This became a singular worry to me, especially when I received word from the primarch himself that he would be taking command of my Chapter for his next campaign. It was almost an accusation, and when I told my company captains I emphasised the need for us to excel, to fight harder and with more dedication than ever before. I impressed on them the need for us to shine in battle when the eyes of the primarch himself were upon us. This message they took to the battle-brothers and as we travelled to the Altyes system we trained harder than ever, so that we might not fail in our primarch’s eyes.’

‘And so it was at this point that you started to subvert your own Chapter against the primarch?’ Boreas said heavily. ‘It was then that your heresy began?’

‘I voiced my concerns to no one, and my research had been circumspect and secret for I hoped that my growing suspicions were unfounded,’ replied Astelan. ‘Let it not be said that I jumped straight to accusation of Lion El’Jonson, that I saw myself somehow as his judge and found him at fault from the outset. No, it was only later, during those long days on Caliban, and even later still while I wandered the wastes of Scappe Delve, that the pieces all coalesced into a single picture, that the instincts, the subconscious observations became focussed into a whole. For I had plenty of time to ponder on my life at that point, and then when I came to leave Scappe Delve, the vision of the Greater Imperium began to take shape and occupied my thoughts. Only now, to you, have I shared these truths.’

‘A dubious honour, you can be sure,’ Boreas said. ‘As you have pointed out yourself, there are explanations for these events, even if I were to discount your obvious paranoia and megalomania. None of what you have told me can justify your actions on Caliban, particularly your attempt to kill the primarch himself. When did your heresies begin, Astelan? When did they really begin? Only when you confront them fully will you see them for the acts of treachery they are, and then be able to repent what you have done.’

‘It began, it truly began, in the Altyes system. Signals had been detected, human in origin, and our primarch wished to investigate them. We proceeded

vigilantly as ever, for the Great Crusade was a war to bring light into the darkness. We never knew what waited for us out in the stars and in the shadows between the starlight. Ancient races with arcane weapons, barbaric human civilisations, worlds in the grip of unfettered technology, human settlements enslaved by aliens, all these things and more were out there.

'So you can understand that whenever we entered a new system we treated it as hostile, not knowing what to expect. Aggression, speed and determination were our greatest weapons, tempered with purity of purpose. All were needed when we arrived at Altyes.'

'What did you find there?'

'The faint signals and their origin proved to be true. There were indeed humans living in Altyes. They had retained much of their civilisation, and would be a great addition to the growing Imperium but for one obstacle. Altyes was overrun with orks. The greenskins had come a century earlier, and overwhelmed the Altyans and now the whole planet was enslaved. The human population had been put to work in great factories to build ships and weapons for the orks, who covered the world in a teeming mass.

'We struck at once. To the Altyans it must have been like a bolt of lightning from the skies, to the orks it was as if the galaxy itself had turned on them. As we descended in drop pods and transports, the fleet opened fire on the planet below. We hardened our hearts to the fact that thousands of Altyans lost their lives alongside the orks, for it was the world that we were trying to save, not individuals.

'How often have the Dark Angels gone to war as a whole Chapter in your lifetime, Chaplain Boreas?'

'Never in my memory, the largest engagement I have been involved in had five companies involved. Why?'

'It is a truly inspiring sight, a whole Chapter at war! Over one thousand Space Marines embodying the Emperor's wrath. The skies fill with the shrieking of jets and blacken with drop pods and gunships. The ground itself explodes with laser blasts, missiles and plasma, tearing at the heart of the enemy, ripping their will to fight from their chests with a single stroke. Even then, with a whole Chapter to command, a thousand Space Marines is few warriors to subjugate a world, but they are enough to destroy any enemy.

'With decisive strikes, we destroyed and captured the largest factories and laid waste to them. Using speed and precision, we struck at the roads and bridges, the fortifications and landing pads. In orbit, our fleet engaged the ork ships and

drove them into the atmosphere or reduced them to blazing hulks. Within two days we had forged ourselves a foothold on Altyes.

'From that breaching point we expanded outwards, driving the orks back, catching them in ambushes, pushing them into ravines and to the coasts. Slowly, surely, their resistance wavered, and we continued to push them hard. We had them surrounded though they outnumbered us by hundreds-to-one, through mobility and co-ordination we divided them and sub-divided them and continued to break them up and exterminate them one part at a time.

'Once orks have landed on a world it is polluted, and we rigorously cleansed Altyes of their presence, eradicating every shred of their contamination. They struck back where they could, but against the battle-brothers of the Dark Angels, their disorganised, lacklustre attacks were all but useless. Their ferocity was as keen as ever, but against the Lion they were doomed. They were outmatched in every single way. In firepower, in manoeuvre, in orbital supremacy, and in sheer fervour, we were always in a position of power. Where they gathered in strength, we pounded them with our ships. Where they were scattered, we sent our rapid strike forces to wipe them out before they could muster a resistance.

'Skilled and as experienced as I was, I learned much on the Altyes campaign. I studied the Lion, the way he planned, the way he directed our strengths and employed stratagems I had never conceived of, never mind put into practice. Yes, I studied hard and learned well, but it was not until Tharsis and the quashing of the rebellion that those lessons were to be employed again by me.

'Despite our unparalleled success, despite the valour of the battle-brothers, destroying a world full of orks is no quick matter. The days turned to weeks, then months, and then a year. But at the end, only one pocket of serious resistance remained. Several thousand orks had taken shelter in one of the passes that split the mountains at the heart of the southern continent. While half my Chapter eliminated all trace of the orks across the rest of Altyes, El'Jonson and myself mustered five companies to wipe out the final ork encampment.

'It was then that Lion El'Jonson revealed his true nature. The orks attacked unexpectedly, perhaps driven by desperation or perhaps by seeing some weakness in our battleline. They charged out of the pass even as we prepared to attack, and smashed through the Eighth Company. But rather than stop to turn east or west, they drove north towards the city of Keltis. Our primarch instructed me to allow them to take the city. This was folly of the highest order, in my opinion, as to do so would endanger half a million Altyans needlessly.'

'But you yourself have already told me of the casualties inflicted on the Altyans

during the initial attack,' countered Boreas. 'What was different about the fate of Keltis?'

'There are unavoidable civilian casualties in war,' Astelan answered carefully. 'Not only would great caution have risked the entire start of our campaign, it would have slowed us and, through our lack of speed, put even more Altyans at risk. At Keltis, there were no such considerations, I believe it was merely El'Jonson's disregard for the worth of human life, his selfish preservation of those under his command, that led to his plan.'

'So, having arrogantly decided that the primarch was wrong, what did you do then?' Boreas asked.

'My Second and Fourth Companies were in a position to cut off the ork attack and hold them up while the rest of the Chapter responded,' explained Astelan. 'It was then, as I looked at the tactical displays that both the genius and the darkness of the Lion were revealed. The Second and Fourth Companies were positioned perfectly for an attack on Keltis, and the primarch's plan was to encircle the orks in the city and eradicate them. It also became clear to me that the chink in our armour, the scattered disposition of the Eighth Company, had been meticulously ordered by the Lion to tempt the orks from the maze of valleys and canyons. Not wishing a potentially bloody assault on the orks' position, he had pulled them out into the open, using the people of Keltis as bait!

'The plan had so far been a complete success, but to my eyes the sacrifice of Keltis was unnecessary. Now that the orks were on the plains, we could attack in force before they even reached the city. I requested that the Second and Fourth Companies be moved to block the ork advance.

'Our primarch refused. He told me to allow the orks to sack Keltis and we would then converge on them in force and destroy them utterly. He was worried that if we attacked on the plains the enemy would have a chance to scatter or even retreat, costing us many more months of fighting, as well as many more Space Marine lives. I asked him how he could justify half a million deaths to save us a few battles and he said that these half a million deaths would save the lives of a hundred Space Marines.

'I was shocked. It is not for us to reckon our worth against the lives of those we protect. Our duty was to defend mankind from aliens, not use them to save ourselves. While death in the populace of a contested world is undesirable, it is often unavoidable. Keltis however, could easily be saved, and thus I argued with El'Jonson, but he would listen to no counsel of mine. So it was with a heavy heart that I ordered the Second and Fourth Companies to intercept the orks and

make a stand before they reached Keltis.'

'You disobeyed the Lion?' Boreas's voice betrayed his genuine shock.

'I did, and I would do so again. The Second and Fourth Companies took heavy casualties as El'Jonson had predicted, but they held against orks until we could counter-attack in force. Also as El'Jonson had predicted, the orks retreated back across the plains, harried by us, but the conclusive victory he had anticipated never happened. Keltis was saved though and I consider myself right to have done what I did.'

'So what happened next?' Boreas asked.

'El'Jonson was enraged,' Astelan answered, eyes closed, shaking his head. 'He banished me and my Chapter back to Caliban, and we were replaced on Altyes by Mentheus's Twenty-third Chapter. Oh yes, is it not convenient that they were only three sub-sectors away? Our shadows had been there all the time. I protested but El'Jonson would not even give me an audience. Thus it was that our exile on our homeworld began.'

'And so you started the first steps along the road to ultimate betrayal of your primarch and your Legion,' sighed Boreas. 'With that simple act of disobedience you condemned the Dark Angels to a legacy of fear and secrecy. It was not the Lion who created that grim future, it was your lack of faith in him, your own rebellious nature and jealousy.'

'That road had been laid down for me ever since Lion El'Jonson had been discovered in the woods of Caliban by Luther,' argued Astelan. 'It was the coming of the primarchs that nearly destroyed the Imperium, and I do not mean just those who turned during the Horus Heresy. At the start of the Great Crusade it had been just us, the Space Marines, and the Emperor as one. But when the primarchs took command of the Legions, another force became involved. Their individual pride, their honour, their ambitions and their traditions cluttered the clarity of the Emperor's vision. It was from that moment that the Imperium was doomed to fall once more.'

'And yet the Imperium still prevails, ten thousand years later. Despite what you say, we are still here.' Boreas pointed out, looking pointedly around the cell.

'But the Great Crusade is a legend, a distant memory. It was never meant to be that, it was never an event, it was a state of mind. It was the primarchs who gave the power to weak, fallible humans after the Horus Heresy. Not from ill intent, but from ignorance. Humans were never supposed to control their own destiny, they are incapable of doing so. What has become of the Imperium? It has become a labyrinth of organisations and politics, bickering Imperial

commanders, and is run by intermediaries, not leaders. The Space Marine Legions were broken down into Chapters, and the Imperial Guard that had risen up in our wake had its ships taken from it and the Imperial Navy was created.

'Even now, I sit in this cell condemned because of the same fear. It is the fear of great men, the love of mediocrity, that the Imperium thrives upon. Humans, and the primarchs who became their puppets, have condemned themselves and us to a slow, lingering death. The Dark Angels fear the humans they protected. Is it not a strange irony that the sacrifice that I made has led to ten thousand years of skulking in the dark? That the bright stars in the firmament of battle have become shadows, afraid to show themselves for what they are, afraid of themselves for what they know lies within them. Ignore my words if you will, but when the time comes, look inside yourself, feel the spirit of the Lion within you. The taint is there. I will say it once more so that you might remember it. There was a darkness within Lion El'Jonson. A darkness you all carry within you. It surrounds you, yet you are blind to its presence. Intrigue, secrets, lies and mystery. These are the legacy of your primarch.'

Boreas did not reply but stood there for a long while in contemplation. Finally, he looked back at Astelan, but said nothing. With a barely perceptible nod, he turned and walked towards the door. Swinging it open, he stopped, his head turned to one side.

'Am I done, Grand Master?' he asked, and Astelan was confused.

'You have done well, Brother-Chaplain,' a deep voice said from behind Astelan. 'You have earned yourself a black pearl for your rosarius. I will deal with this traitor myself.'

Astelan looked around, but at first could see nothing. He heard the door clang shut and the cell was dark again. A movement caught his eye, and he looked more closely in that direction. From the shadows a skull emerged, and he saw that it was the mask of a man swathed in a robe of blackness. The man stepped forward into the dull light of the brazier. Astelan recognised him as the other Space Marine who had been in the chamber when he had first been brought here.

'You have heard everything, you have been here all this time?' he gasped in disbelief. 'Who are you?'

'I am Sapphon, Grand Master of Chaplains, the Finder of Secrets,' the man told him, his voice slow and deliberate. 'I have indeed been here all along. A simple trick, to misdirect your eyes, to focus your attention on other things and not my presence.'

'What will you do with me?' Astelan asked.

Sapphon pointed over Astelan's shoulder, saying nothing. The door opened and two more figures wearing skull masks and black robes entered. They grabbed Astelan with gauntleted hands. He struggled vainly but he was powerless to resist, his strength sapped by days of torture. They dragged him to the door until Sapphon raised his hand and they stopped.

'You will be taken to the deepest recesses of the Rock, and there you shall stay, tended to by the best of our Apothecaries,' said the Grand Master in his deep voice. 'There will be no repentance, there will be no end, swift or otherwise. There you will hear the cries of the Betrayer, and you will come to understand what it is that you have done.'

'Luther, Luther is here?' Astelan said, his thoughts whirling. 'How? Why? Did he not die at the hands of the Lion on Caliban?'

'He did not,' Sapphon told him. 'He is ours, held in the deepest cell of this rock. As his cries for forgiveness echo in your ears, you will learn to beg for mercy as well.'

'I do not understand,' Astelan pleaded.

'You are fond of the sayings of the Imperium,' Sapphon replied with a gesture to the Space Marines holding his prisoner. 'You said they have deeper meaning than many give them credit for. I too understand the wisdom that lies behind the proverbs and curses of the common folk.'

Astelan nodded. He heard Sapphon's voice as the guards pulled him out of the cell and closed the door.

'Knowledge is power, guard it well,' the Grand Master's voice called after him.

# THE TALE OF BOREAS

## PART FIVE

With the *Blade of Caliban*'s reactor at dangerously high levels, it was still a twelve-day journey back to Piscina IV. As soon as the Space Marines were back on board, the ship got under way. Boreas headed directly for the chapel and sealed the door behind him. For ten days he remained there.

Sustained only by the support systems of his armour, the Interrogator-Chaplain knelt unmoving in silent vigil before the altar. If anyone had been there to see him, they might have taken for a statue. But for all his physical immobility, the Interrogator-Chaplain's brain was in a feverish storm. He tried to quiet his tumultuous thoughts with prayers and chants, reciting every hymnal and catechism he knew for hours on end, but to no avail. Despair turned to anger, anger turned to fear, and fear turned back to despair in the whirlwind of his mind.

He searched desperately for reason and calm, but madness crept into his thoughts, battering his conscience, ripping at his pride, fuelling his guilt. Shame burned within him as he thought how rash and foolish he had been. Remorse tortured him until he mentally lashed out, cursing the Grand Masters for their secrecy, damning Hephaestus for his mistrust. Most of all, he was wracked by the futility of his situation. He was helpless, and his emotions, for so long kept in check by iron discipline and training, drifted and raged.

He prayed fervently for guidance, for some sign of what to do, but there were no answers, no revelations. And always the feeling of betrayal rose up in his thoughts. Betrayal by those he served, and betrayal by those he served alongside. Mocking laughter taunted him, and he began to hallucinate, seeing apparitions of a barren Piscina, the ground littered with millions of bones. Contorted, grinning faces swathed in shadow filled his vision, cackling at his ignorance.

Most painful of all was the thought that he had lost. The Fallen had led him by the nose all the way, teasing him onwards, luring him from Piscina. Worse, he felt they had corrupted him spiritually as well as fooling him. He had abandoned his sworn duty to protect Piscina and its inhabitants. They had set him against forces loyal to the Emperor. The sheer scale of what they had done confounded understanding. It had all been an illusion, an elaborate shadow play to pull him further and further from their true purpose.

It seemed so obvious to him now that the riots had been engineered by the Fallen to attract his attention. There had been no mutilated Navigator, it was all a pretext. How long had the agents of the Fallen been manipulating the citizens of Kadillus Harbour, planting the seeds of their lies, scheming in the heart of the realm Boreas had sworn to defend? They would have known he would eventually hear about the *Saint Carthen*'s presence. From then on, their complex plot was set in motion. The Fallen Angels had pitilessly sacrificed their followers to further their plan, knowing that the Dark Angels would be merciless in their hunt. They had left just enough information for him to follow the trail to a false base, to draw him far from where he needed to be.

The most damning part of the plot was its sheer audacity. In his moments of lucidity, Boreas pieced it together, and it was these deductions that caused him to despair of saving Piscina IV from the horrific fate the Fallen had planned. And if Piscina IV fell, then Piscina V would doubtless be the next target. When the *Saint Carthen* had arrived and set in motion the chain of events that had drawn Boreas away, the Fallen had been there, dropped on Piscina. The more he chased the ship, the greater the distance between him and his real quarry. It was a calculated and cruel irony, inspired to cause him the greatest torment. Like puppeteers, his enemies had manipulated him at every turn and had plotted for this moment. Not content with destroying the world under his protection, they had done it in such a way as to damn his soul in the process.

Boreas knelt on the floor of the chapel, head bowed before the altar, and begged the Emperor and his primarch for forgiveness. But he knew there would be none, because he could not forgive himself. It was that shame, the dark coil of sin that writhed inside him, that kept him locked in the shrine. How could he ever leave and face Hephaestus, who unwittingly had damned him? What could he say to Zaul, who had been the most fervent amongst them, and who thought Boreas a hero of the Chapter. And the others – Nestor, Damas and Thumiel – their accusations would be silent but no less crippling. Boreas could not face it. He had none of the answers they would need. They would look to him for strength

and courage, but he had none to give.

On the tenth day, half-delirious, derided by daemons of his own creation, Boreas drew his pistol and held the muzzle against the weaker joint of his neck armour. The bolt would tear into his throat and blow out his spine, ending the pain forever. For half a day he sat, thumb through the trigger guard, imagining the blissful oblivion just a simple motion away.

His mind became still and calm. Everything dropped away from his thoughts, his emotions shrinking to a single, focussed point inside his head. The galaxy disappeared, the ship, his battle-brothers, all of them slid from conscious thought. All that remained was him and the pistol. Life and death.

At that moment, he looked up with his one good eye and saw the Chapter symbol of the Dark Angels on the wall in front of him. It was beautifully crafted, the sword at its centre shaped from pure gold and silver, the dark wings to either side delicately chiselled from black marble. Boreas stood, the bolt pistol dropping from his fingers. He stretched out his hand towards the embodiment of everything he had lived for, everything he had been created to uphold. He took a couple of faltering steps forward and then strode more purposefully around the altar and laid his hand against the sword. Removing his scarred and battered helmet and tossing it to one side, he leaned forward and rested his forehead against the hilt of the sword, feeling the pulse and hub of the ship vibrate through his torn face. Closing his eyes, he bent lower and delicately kissed the blade in thanks.

'Praise the Lion,' he whispered. 'Praise the Lion for his strength, wisdom and fortitude. His blood runs in my veins. His spirit lives on in my soul. Praise the Emperor for his courage, his guidance and his purpose. By his hand, I was made. By his will, I live. There is no peace, no respite. There is only war.'

Boreas found the others gathered in the reclusium, seated in silent meditation, dressed in their robes. It was Zaul who looked up first, his expression of surprise quickly turning to joy.

'Brother Boreas!' he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. The others broke out of their trances and stood, their reactions a mixture of curiosity and relief. Only Hephaestus remained seated, staring at the ground.

'Brother Hephaestus?' Boreas said, walking over to stand in front of the Techmarine. He saw that his hands were cut and bruised, and there were stark weals across his chest and shoulders. There was a haunted look in his eye as he raised his gaze to the Interrogator-Chaplain. Boreas offered his hand, and after a

moment's hesitation, the Techmarine grasped it firmly and pulled himself to his feet, a faint smile playing on his lips.

'Nestor was correct,' Boreas said, turning to address them all. 'Now is not the time to judge, or for recriminations. Now, more than ever, we must be united. They want to divide us, to pit us against each other and ourselves. We shall not let them conquer us, we are stronger than they.'

Zaul hurried forward and clapped a hand onto Boreas's left shoulder, still grinning.

'We were vexed by your absence, Brother-Chaplain,' Zaul said, his grin replaced by a look of consternation. 'We were lost without your guidance, your words of wisdom.'

'We debated much over what to do,' explained Damas. 'We were unsure of the best course of action.'

'As was I,' admitted Boreas, clasping Zaul's shoulder in return. 'I wandered a lonely path, but the Lion guided me back.'

'What are your orders?' asked Nestor. 'I think it is paramount that we return to the citadel as soon as we arrive at Piscina IV.'

'I agree,' Boreas replied, stepping back, his fists balling at his side. 'We must confirm what we have learnt. The Fallen have played a deadly game with us until now, and this may yet be another falsehood set to confound us.'

'And if it is not?' asked Thumiel. 'What then?'

'If we can, we prevent them from succeeding,' Boreas answered quickly. 'If we are too late, then we mourn the loss.'

'And what of the Fallen?' Damas inquired.

'We shall seek justice and exact punishment, as we have done for ten thousand years,' Boreas replied.

They stood there for a moment, this one thought joining them together. Boreas stepped up to Damas and plucked at his robe with his finger.

'You are out of your armour, brother-sergeant,' Boreas said with a slight smile. 'As are you all. I do not remember announcing the crusade accomplished.'

'As you will it, Brother Boreas,' Zaul replied. 'We shall arm ourselves for the continuing fight. But I suggest that while we do so, you eat heartily and refresh yourself. I smelt you before I saw you, and your face is as thin as an eldar's. Your search for guidance must have taken you far.'

'It was a long path,' Boreas agreed with a nod. 'A long and dangerous path, but one I shall not need to tread again.'

As the Thunderhawk streaked down through the upper atmosphere of Piscina IV, the comm was filled with a cacophony of transmissions. For the last two days the *Blade of Caliban* had attempted to make contact with the planet's surface or the orbiting station, but there had been no reply. Boreas's fears had increased with the continuing silence, fearing that it betrayed the extinction of life on the world, that the Fallen had activated the annihilus and wiped out everything he had sworn to protect. Now, as the Space Marines headed towards their fortress, every frequency, every transmission medium, was bursting with almost meaningless chatter, and disturbing as it was, Boreas felt relief that there was still life on the planet below.

All attempts to make contact with the surface still failed, and the Interrogator-Chaplain could not yet decide what course of action to take. As much as he tried, Hephaestus could do nothing to filter out the messages that overlaid each other, and only scattered fragments barked from the audio unit in garbled bursts.

'…casualties at thirty-five per cent…'

'…sporadic fire continuing, falling back…'

'…desert us not in the hour of need, turn to the great benevolent…'

'…west wing in ruins, fires spreading, tenders dry…'

'…ay of the Emperor's judgement is upon us, for the sinf…'

'…evacuation stalled…'

'…abandoned us. I can't believe they abandoned us. I can't believe…'

'…o response to hails. It's as if they…'

'…Emperor protect us, there's bodies everywhere. It's like a slaughter house in…'

'…why did they do this? It doesn't make any…'

'…casualties now at forty per cent, further advance possible…'

Boreas flicked off the comm in frustration and stared out over the blunt nose of the gunship. Thick white cloud spread out beneath them, but ahead a darker patch was spreading, polluting the sky. For a few seconds, as the Thunderhawk passed through the cloud layer, the Interrogator-Chaplain could see nothing but whiteness. Then, as the gunship broke out of the underside, he caught his first sight of Kadillus Harbour.

More than a dozen columns of smoke rose into the air from across the city, and even at this altitude, he could see massive fires raging around the docks and the starport. Turning his gaze to his left he saw more evidence of trouble, explosions blooming on the volcano's slopes close to Barrak Mine at the north end of Koth Ridge.

‘Head straight for the outpost, we can land in the Kandal Park,’ he told Boreas, unable to tear his gaze from the scene of devastation below them.

As the Thunderhawk swooped lower over the city, Boreas could make out more evidence of heavy fighting. The ruined shells of buildings and smouldering ruins of hab-blocks sat alongside tracts of rubble, demolished factories and a mess of twisted girders and cranes.

‘What could have happened?’ Hephaestus asked. ‘It is as if the city is tearing itself apart.’

‘I think it is,’ Boreas replied, pointing at the streets below. They were filled with people, tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of them thronging the roads, setting fires, looting and fighting. They saw clusters of Imperial Guard, firing indiscriminately into the crowds. Even more disturbing, tanks rolled down the roadways, blasting at buildings and citizens with equal fury, their heavy bolters blazing, a swathe of crushed bodies left in their wake. He saw Guardsmen fighting Guardsmen, battling across rooftops, fighting street-to-street.

People on the ground began to notice the gunship overhead as it slowed and circled to land. Some threw their arms in the air, obviously pleading to the Space Marines. Bullets whined nearby as others started shooting, and lasbolts deflected ineffectually off the Thunderhawk’s heavy armour.

‘I can’t land!’ Hephaestus said. ‘There is no clear zone.’

Boreas looked ahead and saw that the open park was full of people. The carefully cultured trees and hedges, the only life inside the city that was not in the Imperial commander’s gardens, were trampled and burnt. The lawns and rock gardens were covered with people, and many bodies.

‘Just land!’ ordered Boreas, unhitching his harness and stepping into the crew compartment. Hephaestus glanced at the Chaplain’s retreating back, shook his head and then directed his attention back to the controls.

The Thunderhawk descended on pillars of blue fire. The crowds tried to scatter, but the press of the bodies meant that many were caught in the downwash of the jets, reduced to ashes instantly. The gunship settled heavily into the soft earth, crushing the charred corpses of those caught below, its metallic feet sinking a metre into the soil. The assault ramp swung down and Boreas stood at its head, bolt pistol in hand. People began to surge towards him and he fired into the air. Some stopped, others threw themselves to the ground, many turned and tried to flee, their screams filling the air.

A woman with a tangled mass of hair, her red woollen dress stained with soot,

sprinted up the ramp, a carving knife in her hands. She threw herself at Boreas, the blade buckling on the armour of his breastplate. He shoved her aside, toppling her off the ramp onto the scorched earth.

'Cease this madness!' he bellowed, but the terrified and frenzied mob paid him no heed, stampeding forwards and backwards, trampling over those who fell, their cries of fear and pain drowned out by the shouting and shrieking.

'We must break through, use minimal force,' he said, stepping down the ramp. 'We can devise a strategy once we have ascertained whether the keep is still intact.' The others followed, looking left and right in disbelief as they descended. As the last of them stepped out, the ramp closed behind him with a loud grinding.

Boreas battered his way through the press of bodies, shoving men and women aside to get through. He grabbed an old man by the throat and hurled him away as he tried to prise Boreas's bolt pistol from its scabbard. Others scrabbled at his knife, or battered at his chest and legs, and he drove them away with bone-crunching sweeps of his hand. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the others were making equally slow progress, the crowd surging in behind him as he ploughed forwards.

As he waded through the human morass, Boreas began to listen to their shouts. They were cursing the Dark Angels, calling them traitors and murderers. They begged the Emperor to bring his vengeance down on the Space Marines, accusing them of oath-breaking. A sick feeling grew inside Boreas as he guessed what had occurred.

The Fallen were here, or had been. The citizens of Piscina, the Imperial Guard, the security officers would have thought them loyal Space Marines. They knew little of the Horus Heresy, even less of the continuing fight against the Traitor Legions, and nothing of the treachery of the Lutherites. Boreas dared not think what atrocities they had committed, but whatever they were, it had turned the world against the Dark Angels.

'We must get through to the outpost, whatever the cost,' he told the squad, smashing his gauntleted fist into the chest of a thin, bearded man who swung at him with a metal bar.

Boreas drove forward with greater ferocity, crashing through the mob and scattering them left and right. He reached the high metal fence that surrounded the park, subconsciously noting the mangled bodies that lay along its length, those who had been crushed to death by the press of people. Without pausing, he tore two of the railings clear, and then two more, and again, until he had opened

a hole wide enough to clamber through. The street beyond was quiet, the high buildings stretching up either side deserted.

Turning left, he broke into a run, pounding along the street in the direction of the keep. As his anger rose, his speed increased, until he was hurtling at full sprint along the road. Turning a corner, he ran into the wide, rockcrete killing ground surrounding the outpost. Scores of Guardsmen were there, fighting with citizens and each other. The blazing wrecks of two personnel carriers cast a bloody hue over the scene. Boreas slowed to a halt. Looking out over the mass of brawling people, he spied another troop transport, flying the banner of Colonel Brade. The flare of las-fire illuminated the grim scene as the carrier's multi-laser opened fire, the energy bolts scything through Guardsmen and maddened citizens alike.

'Clear a path. Fire to wound if possible, kill if necessary,' the Chaplain ordered, pulling free his bolt pistol.

He fired ahead as he advanced, shooting low, the bolts fracturing thighbones, ripping through hips and shattering kneecaps, until a corridor had opened up in front of him leading towards Brade. The small turret on the APC turned in his direction, and for a moment it looked as if it was going to fire at him. Then the barrels tilted downwards before another blaze of shots tore through the hellish battle, clearing an open route for him. Boreas ran forward, the other Dark Angels close behind, and stopped next to the transport. He banged on the hull and a moment later the hatch opened and Colonel Brade stuck his head out.

'Thank the Emperor you have returned, Lord Boreas,' the colonel gasped, clambering out awkwardly. He stared for a moment at the Space Marines as if it was the first time he had seen them properly. It was then that Boreas realised it probably was, at least with their present appearance. Their armour was bone white, decorated with red, green and black heraldry, and festooned with purity seals that fluttered in the wind. Dents, bullet holes, las-scorches and pieces of embedded shrapnel still scarred their armour, despite Hephaestus's best repairs in the time he had been allowed. Damas's armour was covered head-to-toe in the neat script of the Opus Victorium, and the side of Boreas's own skull helm was covered in a bare metal plate where it had been punctured.

'Tell me everything,' Boreas demanded, turning so that he could keep a careful watch on the fighting. The battle started to move away as the Guardsmen protecting the colonel forced their way to the north with fusillades of las-fire, driving the armed mob away from the keep. Bullets and las-shots still occasionally whined overhead and the air was filled with the clamour of

shouting, firing and intermittent explosions.

'I hardly know where to start–' Brade said with a shake of his head, glancing cautiously around.

'Tell me about the Space Marines,' Boreas prompted, directing Thumiel and Damas to cover the other side of the vehicle with a flick of his hand. He heard the bark of their bolters now and then as they fired at rebels who had broken through the cordon of Imperial Guard.

'How did you know–?' Brade asked.

'That is not important,' Boreas waved away the colonel's question. 'You must tell me about the other Space Marines.'

'No one is sure when they arrived, they certainly weren't seen getting off any ship or shuttle that landed,' the colonel began. 'I simply heard from the commander's enforcers that Space Marines had returned to the keep and I thought nothing more of it, assuming it was you and the others. Then the orks attacked again, in such numbers I haven't seen since the invasion. They overran Vartoth in an afternoon, and we threw up a line to hold them from coming further south. They broke through early evening yesterday and now we're desperately trying to hold on to Barrak.'

'I saw the fighting,' Boreas said. 'Where are the Space Marines now?'

'I don't know,' Brade replied with a shrug. He flinched as a shell detonated against the wall of a nearby building. 'I tried to contact you at the keep, but there was no reply, so I sent a delegation to ask for an audience. That's when they came out. I only have scattered reports, I'm not sure what happened next.'

'Tell me what you know,' Boreas urged him. 'Every detail could be important.'

'Well, the first group to emerge just ignored the messengers,' Brade said, his brow creased in a frown of concentration. He looked about ready to collapse, his face haggard, his eyes heavy and dark. 'There were three, maybe four of them. They were definitely Space Marines. Their armour was the same as yours, the Chapter symbol, the badges. My officers tried to speak to their leader, but they were shoved aside, and they dared not persevere for risk of offence.'

'How did they know who their leader was?' Boreas asked.

'He was dressed differently,' the colonel explained. 'He wore long robes like a coat over his armour, and carried two bolt pistols in low slung holsters.'

'A sword in a scabbard. Did he carry a long sword in an ornate scabbard?' demanded Boreas, feeling an unfamiliar chill of foreboding.

'Yes, yes, I think the survivor mentioned that,' Brade answered, nodding slightly. 'Do you know him?'

‘Only *of* him,’ Boreas replied. ‘It is not your concern, continue. You said survivor?’

‘Er, yes,’ Brade said, visibly shaken. ‘The first group headed south, towards the docks, and disappeared. I don’t know where they went. My men didn’t know what to do. They contacted me by comm to ask for orders, and that’s when the others came out. They opened fire immediately, I heard Lieutenant Thene screaming over the comm, and bolter fire. One of the officers, Lieutenant Straven, ran immediately. He was the only one who got away, the others were cut down where they stood.’

‘And then?’ Boreas prompted Brade, who had lapsed into deep thought.

‘Then they started the massacre,’ the colonel said with a grimace. ‘They advanced into the city, killing anyone in their path, destroying ground cars, tossing grenades into buildings. It was carnage. We didn’t know what to do, and by the time a platoon arrived, they were nowhere to be found. But it was too late by then. Panic began to spread, the word got out that the Dark Angels had turned on us. I didn’t believe it, but then everything descended into anarchy. There were riots everywhere, half my own men joined in, under the pretence of hunting the Space Marines down. After that, it just got worse and worse.’

‘And the situation now?’ Boreas asked.

‘You saw for yourself, I’m sure,’ Brade said bitterly. ‘The entire city is in revolt, but the Imperial commander is safe, we have tanks stationed at all the roads leading to the palaces. Northport is in ruins, no ship can leave or land, and the docks are little more than rubble.’

‘I must attend to urgent matters at the keep,’ Boreas said. Motioning the squad to follow, Boreas began to march towards the gatehouse of the keep. He had only taken a few paces when he turned back to look at Brade.

‘Thank you for trusting in us,’ Boreas said.

‘I had to keep my trust in you,’ the colonel replied, leaning back against the armoured carrier. ‘I had to believe that you had not betrayed us. The alternative is too terrible to contemplate.’

‘Yes it is, colonel,’ Boreas agreed quietly. ‘Hold the perimeter here for as long as you can, I shall contact you again shortly.’

The main gate into the citadel was sealed shut. Pressing the entry combination, the door slid aside and the Space Marines entered, weapons ready. As they stepped inside, the door hissed back into position behind them.

Three bodies lay in pools of blood in the entrance hall, the red-robed

gatekeepers whose duty it had been to receive delegations from the Imperial commander. Examining them, Nestor pointed at the deep knife wounds across their chests and throats. The unarmed men had been butchered, probably as they had welcomed their unexpected visitors.

As they progressed, they found more evidence of cold-blooded murder. Attendants, scribes and logisticians lay at or near their work stations, also brutally slashed and stabbed. Working their way up the tower, they found bodies on the stairs and in the hallways. With trepidation, Boreas followed Damas into the aspirants' chambers.

The veteran sergeant gave a howl of anguish and ran forward. The bodies of the youths were draped across their cots, sprawled on the floor and slumped against the walls. Damas checked each in turn, and when he got to the last he shook his head slowly.

'Their necks have been snapped,' he stated flatly, the corpses reflected in the red lenses of his helmet. He lifted up the hands of the boy at his feet, the youth called Varsin. His knuckles were bloodied and broken. 'They tried to fight, as I taught them. It would have been futile.'

'They died bravely,' said Zaul. 'They died fighting for the Emperor.'

'No!' Damas snarled. 'There was no bravery here, just desperation! Pointless, senseless slaughter. This served no purpose. None of this killing did. They were defenceless, all of them.'

There was a point, but Boreas chose not to share it with his distraught brethren. It was the final insult, the final challenge to the might of the Dark Angels. It was a statement of intent, as clear to Boreas as if it were written in blood on the walls – the Dark Angels had no future.

'We must check the vault,' Nestor said suddenly.

'The annihilus is obviously not active,' Hephaestus pointed out. 'If it were, there would be nothing left alive on the island.'

'They may have tampered with it,' the Apothecary insisted.

'Very well,' Boreas agreed. 'Nestor and Hephaestus with me. Zaul, Thumiel, check the upper storeys and the roof. Damas, go to the vehicle bay and ready the Rhino for combat.'

As he walked down the stairs, Boreas felt drained and empty. The Fallen had done more than simply kill the servants of the Chapter. By attacking here, in the Dark Angels' own outpost, they had driven a blade into the heart of the Chapter.

They passed signs of sporadic fighting as they travelled through the keep: bullet holes in the wall, a ragged corpse draped down the stairwell, trails of dried blood

on the floor.

When they entered the vaults, stepping over the bodies of three serfs who had tried to defend the entrance, Nestor carried on past the operations chamber, deeper into the tunnels. Ahead, an armoured door hung open, twisted off its heavy hinges, the locking bolts ripped aside. Nestor dashed forward into the small chamber beyond. A few moments later he reappeared, and leant heavily against the wall.

'They have taken it,' moaned the Apothecary.

'Taken what?' demanded Boreas. He knew of the Apothecary's storage crypt and assumed it contained rare or possibly volatile medical supplies.

'The gene-seed, they have taken the sacred gene-seed,' Nestor replied, his voice a hoarse whisper.

'Gene-seed?' Boreas was confused. Then the realisation struck him and his anger welled up. 'More secrets! More lies and half-truths!'

'It was for the security of the Chapter, Boreas,' Nestor said, hanging his head. 'It would be folly for all of our gene-seed to be carried in the Tower of Angels. What if the unthinkable happened? What if the Rock were lost? Destroyed in the warp, perhaps? After we survived the loss of Caliban the Lion wanted to ensure the Chapter would always endure. It was decided that some of the gene-seed would be sent to distant outposts, hidden away, its location known to only a select few.'

'What do you know about Caliban?' demanded Boreas. 'What else have you kept from me?'

'Boreas, Brother-Chaplain…' Nestor's voice was tainted with a harsh laugh, edged with insanity. 'I am six hundred and seventeen years old, did you really think that after all this time I would not be a member of the Inner Circle? That's why a veteran like myself is here, on this forsaken outpost. To protect the future, to guard the gene-seed.'

The words of Astelan sprang into Boreas's mind: *There was a darkness within Lion El'Jonson. A darkness you all carry within you. It surrounds you, yet you are blind to its presence. Intrigue, secrets, lies and mystery.* They shrouded the Dark Angels Chapter, a veil of darkness they had woven around outsiders and themselves.

'We must recover the gene-seed at all costs,' Nestor insisted, having recovered from the shock, walking between Boreas and Hephaestus. The Techmarine was standing rigidly still, stunned by the turn of events. As Nestor pushed past, he seemed to snap out of it.

‘First we must check the annihilus is intact,’ the Techmarine said, looking at Boreas.

‘Where?’ the Interrogator-Chaplain asked.

‘The main control chamber, I can access it from there,’ Hephaestus replied, following Nestor down the dimly lit tunnel.

Entering the control chamber, Hephaestus crossed to the central platform and activated one of the central interfaces. Around him, screens flickered into life, bathing the room in an erratic green glow, and the needles of gauges monitoring the keep’s power systems wavered in their glasses. On one screen to Boreas’s left, the Chaplain saw a view of the courtyard outside, and watched as rebels surged forwards against the line of Imperial Guard, some mercilessly cut down by volleys of fire, others battering their way through with fists and rocks. Tearing his attention away, Boreas watched as Hephaestus’s fingers danced over a runepad.

‘Hurry! Every moment wasted takes the Fallen and the gene-seed further out of out reach,’ Nestor snapped from just outside the doorway.

Meaningless numerals, letters and symbols scrolled up the screen as Hephaestus worked. The screen then went blank for a few seconds before an empty white box appeared at its centre.

‘Authority cipher,’ explained the Techmarine as he entered a sequence of runes. The screen went blank again for a few more seconds before a message appeared.

+CIPHER ACCEPTED – ANNIHILUS VIRAL FAILSAFE ACTIVATED+

‘Something is wrong,’ the Techmarine warned, stabbing at keys without response.

‘What’s happening? Tell me what this means!’ demanded Boreas, staring at the words on the display.

Hephaestus ignored the Chaplain as he continued to desperately punch in security protocols and override commands. Stepping back, he smashed his fist into the screen, sending shards of glass spinning through the air.

‘Hephaestus, tell me what’s happening!’ Boreas yelled, dragging the Techmarine around to face him.

‘One last trick,’ muttered Hephaestus. He looked back at the shattered screen and then at Boreas. ‘They broke into the core machine spirit and gave it new commands. As soon as I accessed the annihilus, it was primed to activate.’

‘Can’t you stop it?’ asked Nestor, taking a pace into the room.

‘No, it’s impossible, there’s no delay,’ Hephaestus told them. ‘Activation is immediate. The annihilus was always intended to be a last resort. Why take the

risk of it being deactivated during a countdown?'

'You mean the virus is spreading even now?' asked Boreas, looking around him as if he might see the deadly toxin flooding the air.

'Yes,' the Techmarine answered, slumping against the console. 'We failed.'

'What happens next?' Nestor asked. 'What type of virus is it?'

'Omniphagic,' replied Hephaestus heavily. 'It will devour all living matter. It can be airborne or waterborne, and will pass by contact. Kadillus Harbour will be infected within two hours of release, the island within half a day. After that it depends on wind strength and the currents, but the virus will wipe out every living creature, destroy every organic cell on the planet, within five days. As it spreads it grows more virulent, in a cyclical effect that will strip the planet bare. Even bones will be destroyed. Were it not for our armour and helmets, we would already be dead. We have failed.'

'Not wholly,' Nestor said, causing Boreas and Hephaestus to look up sharply. Hope flared within the Interrogator-Chaplain. 'We can still retrieve the gene-seed.'

'Zaul, Damas, Thumiel, assemble in the entrance chamber!' commanded Boreas, striding off the control dais. The other two fell in behind him. As he walked, he explained the situation to those who had not been present.

'Why would they do such a thing?' Zaul asked over the comm-net. 'What is the point?'

'I cannot say for sure, but I think it is a message,' Boreas told them. 'They want our brethren to know what happened here, but for what twisted reason I cannot fathom.'

'Why risk us not activating it?' Hephaestus wondered. 'To tie the activation in with the override seems a foolish thing to do.'

'The prisoner Boreas questioned in their base spoke of dissent,' Nestor recalled. 'Perhaps some of them did not agree, perhaps they were only after the gene-seed. The others might not have had the opportunity to properly set the annihilus and so had to resort to deception.'

'Or they just wanted to ensure they were clear of the planet before the virus was released,' suggested Damas. 'It would seem likely for such a cowardly act.'

'It matters not,' growled Boreas. 'When we take them, they shall tell us everything! I will personally see to that.'

Damas was the last to arrive in the entrance chamber, and fell in beside Boreas, who stood facing the sealed door.

‘We must get back to the Thunderhawk. Kill if necessary,’ the Chaplain told his squad. ‘The Fallen will not escape us; I will hunt them under every rock and across every kilometre of space. For what they have done today, I will inflict pain upon them never before envisaged. I will make them live for a year and a day in agony as justice for their crimes.’

He took a step towards the door, and then stopped suddenly.

‘Brother-chaplain?’ Nestor inquired. ‘Is there something wrong.’

‘Hephaestus, tell me, where is the virus stored?’ Boreas asked, turning to the Techmarine.

‘In the lowest vault,’ he answered. ‘Of what relevance is that?’

‘The first aim of the virus is to cleanse the keep of intruders, correct?’ Boreas continued his chain of thought.

‘Yes, the virus is released internally first, before spreading to the rest of the city,’ Hephaestus confirmed.

‘And how does it spread?’ Boreas asked.

‘Simple, if the keep has been breached or has been taken, there will be any number of ways for it to pass into the…’ Hephaestus’s voice trailed off as he followed Boreas’s gaze towards the armoured entry portal. ‘There has been no attack, no breach…’

‘The tower is completely sealed,’ Boreas said, looking at each of the others. ‘As protection from gas or viral attack from outside, the keep is airtight. Until we break that seal, the virus is confined to the interior.’

‘But as soon as we leave, the seal is broken,’ said Nestor. ‘I do not understand.’

‘We will not be leaving,’ Damas explained slowly.

‘But the Fallen, the gene-seed–’ Nestor protested bitterly. ‘Piscina is already doomed. Although the circumstances of its activation may have been unorthodox, the virus bomb’s purpose remains the same. Kadillus is in the grip of revolt, and the orks are attacking in overwhelming numbers. The planet is already lost. We shall simply be hastening its demise. The virus will cleanse the world as it was supposed to, denying it to the enemies of the Emperor.’

‘No,’ Boreas answered flatly.

‘No?’ roared Nestor. ‘You would abandon the hope of our Chapter’s future for a world already in flames, on the brink of destruction? You would sacrifice that for a dying world?’

‘A world we swore to protect,’ Boreas reminded him. ‘A sacred oath to lay down our lives and guard it by whatever means necessary.’

‘Piscina is lost!’ declared the Apothecary. ‘If the rebellion does not destroy this

world, the orks will overrun it! There is nothing left to save, Boreas!'

'We are not leaving,' Boreas said stubbornly, recalling his arguments with Astelan. 'We live to serve the Emperor and mankind, not the Dark Angels.'

'This is heresy,' Nestor barked. 'Are you renouncing your oaths of allegiance?'

'No, I am remembering them,' Boreas snapped. 'We swore to protect Piscina, and that is what we will do. It matters not if the price is our lives, or even the sacred gene-seed; this duty overrides all others.'

'I cannot let you do this,' Nestor said, taking a step towards the door. 'My duty, my oath, was to protect that gene-seed.'

Boreas grabbed the plasma pistol from Hephaestus's belt and thumbed the activation switch. It began to hum and vibrate in his grip as it charged up.

'You will not open that door, Brother-Apothecary,' warned Boreas, pointing the pistol at Nestor's head.

'What treachery is this?' Nestor's voice, even distorted through his suit, dripped with scorn. 'You would kill your own brethren rather than continue the great quest of our Chapter? You, a Chaplain, guardian of our traditions and guide to our souls, would rather kill me than atone for a sin ten thousand years old? I think not.'

Nestor took three more steps and reached towards the portal runepad. Boreas pulled the trigger and a ball of superheated plasma smashed into the Apothecary, exploding on impact. His headless torso, the stump of his neck cauterised and smoking, pitched forward and slumped against the gate.

'None of us are leaving,' Boreas said, handing the pistol back to Hephaestus.

'You do realise that if we do not leave, we will die here,' the Techmarine told them. 'The virus can stay active for up to seventy days once released. That is over twenty days longer than the environmental systems in our armour can sustain us.'

'I will obey your command, Brother-Chaplain,' Zaul said. 'If it is to die here, then so be it.'

'You are to achieve orbit of Piscina V, and guard against any intrusion.' Boreas stood in the control room, at the comms station, instructing Sen Naziel. 'Nothing is to land, nothing. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Lord Boreas,' the ship's officer replied.

'I will shortly transmit a coded message,' Boreas continued. 'When the Tower of Angels arrives, it is to be passed on to Grand Master-Chaplain Sapphon. No blame will be attached to you or the crew for the events and our actions of these

last weeks. I commend you for your dedication to the Chapter, and your perseverance in the pursuit of your duties.'

'And when will you be joining us again?' Naziel asked. Boreas paused, unsure what to say.

'We will not be joining you,' he said eventually. 'These are my final commands. The Grand Masters will inform you of your future.'

'I don't understand, my lord.' The confusion was evident in Neziel's voice.

'You do not have to understand, merely obey your orders, Sen,' Boreas told him. 'Honour the Chapter. Venerate the Emperor. Praise the Lion.'

'Praise the Lion,' Naziel echoed and Boreas switched off the link. Turning his attention to the data log, he activated the recorder.

'This is Interrogator-Chaplain Boreas of the Emperor's Dark Angels Chapter,' he began. 'This is my final communication from Piscina, as commander of the Dark Angels in the system. Our ancient foes have struck a blow against our Chapter. The reviled enemy has wounded us severely. We are entangled in a plot that goes beyond our comprehension. The events I am about to relate stretch beyond this world, beyond the furthest reaches of this star system. Great and dark powers are at work, I see their hand manipulating us, bending us to their twisted goals.'

He stopped, choosing his next words carefully.

'For ten thousand years we have sought redemption. We have pursued that which shamed our brethren when our time of triumph was at hand. It was a grave, unforgivable sin, which must be atoned for. That is beyond doubt. But these last days, an even greater sin has come to light. It is the sin of ignorance. It is the sin of past errors repeated.

'I ask myself what it means to be one of the Dark Angels. Is it to hunt the Fallen, chasing shadows through the dark places of the galaxy? Is it to pursue our quest at any expense, foregoing all other oaths and duties? Is it to lie, to hide and to plot so that others will never know of our shame? Is it to keep our own brethren unacquainted with the truth of our past, the legacy we all share in? Or is it to be a Space Marine? Is it to follow the path laid down by the Emperor and Lion El'Jonson at the founding of this great Imperium of Man? To protect mankind, to purge the alien, cleanse the unclean?

'We must act as a shining brand in the night, to lead the way for others to follow. We are the warriors of the Emperor, guardians of mankind. Roboute Guilliman called us bright stars in the firmament of battle, untouched by self-aggrandisement. Yet we, the Dark Angels, commit the supreme sin. We put

ourselves before our duty. We have buried our traditions, masked our real history in legend and mysticism to confound others. We are not bright stars, we are an empty blackness, a passing shadow that serves nothing but its own purpose.'

He stopped again, feeling weary, and leant against the panel. He knew they would not listen, that in fact they could not listen, for he spoke against everything that made the Dark Angels what they are.

'Included in this log is a complete account of the disaster that has befallen Piscina and us. For this, I take sole responsibility. Our enemies know us too well. We have become an anathema to ourselves, as this plot of the Fallen demonstrates. Everything that has transpired has led us to this place and time, and there is nothing left but to do what we must. Ten thousand years ago, our soul was split. We tell ourselves that the two halves of us are the light and the dark. I have learnt a bitter lesson, that it is not true. It is a comforting lie, which keeps us safe from doubt, so that we do not ask the questions whose answers we fear. There is no light and dark, only the shades of twilight in between.

'If once there was a chance for us to redeem ourselves, it passed away ten thousand years ago. For a hundred centuries it has driven us, and consumed us at the same time. Not while one Fallen stays alive can we know peace within ourselves. But what then? What does it mean to be Dark Angels without the Fallen? We have come to define ourselves by them. Take them away and we are left without purpose. We have strayed far from the path, and it is my fervent prayer that you, the Grand Masters of the Chapter, the wisest of us, can find the true course again. If not, then there will never be salvation, and all that we aspire to will come to nothing, all that we have achieved will be in vain. I beseech you not to allow this to happen. We are to make the ultimate sacrifice for the people of Piscina, and to safeguard our future. Do not make the deaths of my brethren be for nothing.'

Boreas switched off the log and walked away. As he reached the doorway, he stopped, another thought occurring to him, and walked back and reactivated the recorder.

'I have one more message to pass on. Walk that dark road down through the rooms of the interrogators, past the catacombs into the deepest chambers. Go to that solitary cell at the heart of the Rock and tell him this: *You were not wrong.'*

They gathered in the chapel, their robes draped over their armour. Along one wall lay the bodies of the forty-two attendants and fourteen aspirants, each covered with a white shroud embroidered with the Chapter symbol. At the end,

his shroud inverted, lay Nestor. The Dark Angels knelt in a single line in front of the altar, Zaul and Hephaestus to Boreas's left, Thumiel and Damas to his right. They each clasped a melta-bomb to their chests and bowed their heads. Boreas held the detonator, his thumb over the trigger stud. They had been unanimous – better to end the ordeal quickly, lest desperation set in as they starved to death and asphyxiated, and they showed weakness. This way was clean and instant.

'What is it that gives us purpose?' Boreas chanted.

'*War*,' the others replied.

'What is it that gives war purpose?'

*'To vanquish the foes of the Emperor.'*

'Who are the foes of the Emperor?'

*'The heretic, the alien and the mutant.'*

'What is it to be an enemy of the Emperor?'

*'It is to be damned.'*

'What is the instrument of the Emperor's damnation?'

*'We, the Space Marines, the angels of death.'*

'What is it to be a Space Marine?'

*'It is to be pure, to be strong, to show no pity, nor mercy, nor remorse.'*

'What is it to be pure?'

*'To never know fear, to never waver in the fight.'*

'What is it to be strong?'

*'To fight on when others flee; to stand and die in the knowledge that death brings ultimate reward.'*

'What is the ultimate reward?'

*'To serve the Emperor.'*

'Who do we serve?'

*'We serve the Emperor and the Lion, and through them we serve mankind.'*

'What is it to be Dark Angels?'

*'It is to be the first, the honoured, the sons of the Lion.'*

'Praise the Lion,' Boreas said, pressing the stud.

# AZRAEL

*‘Forget your past life. From this day on you are simply a Dark Angel – nothing else is of consequence. The Chapter is all that matters.’*

# PART ONE

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

*Blood on the snow.*

*He remembers it pooling crimson against the white, crystals of ice melting. The wind kept at bay by the tall cliffs, leaving calm and quiet for the drip-drip-drip of emptying life fluid to sound impossibly loud in his ears.*

*The head had belonged to a Borsginian, his plaited hair caked in dried blood, pierced nose flattened by the blow that had knocked him down. His throat had been parted by the axe strike that had followed.*

*The head sits atop the third pole of defeated foes, crowning seven others below it. He steps back, admiring the battlework of the past year since he was old enough to join the hird. Twenty-four foes, all dead by his hand. He remembers each one and smiles at the recollection. Raiders defeated, guards slain, warriors bested.*

*A shout from the fires at the head of the valley draws his attention back to the others. He has nearly forgotten that tonight the elders will issue a pronouncement. He is to be confirmed as successor to the leadership of their people, to become chieftain when his father dies. Twenty-four heads prove that the blood is strong, that the line of Vangar the Bloodwoven still deserve to lead the Gothra.*

*His name is called, almost lost as the storm strengthens. The clouds are darkening rapidly, the snows coming thicker and faster. The light of the fires starts to dim as the sun dips below the cliff tops.*

*There is drinking and feasting. The raid against the Borsgini brought back much-needed meat, cheese and even fresh milk.*

*For a moment, trudging through the old snow while fresh fall flutters down, he wonders again if there is another way. What if the Gothra gave the Borsgini iron*

*instead of sheathing it in their bellies? And the Borsgini gave back the product of their herds in return?*

*His father scorned the idea of trade. Lean times, he had said, make for poor bargains. The Gothra had only their sword-arms to negotiate with, and that kept their neighbours honest enough and the store-tents full.*

*He is greeted by accepting smiles and nods as he enters the circle of warriors around the greatest fire. The elders are impassive. Faces carved by age and harsh weather look at him silently; their pale eyes reflect the dancing flames.*

*Thunder splits the sky.*

*Not thunder, he learns a heartbeat later when the roar continues, drawn out and increasing in temper. The others look to the skies and his gaze follows theirs. Fire burns in the clouds. Three red sparks turn slowly about the camp of the Gothra.*

*There is commotion about the fires. More shouting, calling the names of the others recently ascended to warriorhood, demanding they come forth from the other fires.*

*'The stars have brought the war-angels again!' cries Demetha, her voice cracking with emotion, long white hair whipping like serpents about her head. 'Set forth our sons for their judgement!'*

*The youths of the Gothra race out into the darkness, following the gleam of the war-angels' iron birds as they descend towards the proving grounds at the end of the valley. The adults watch them leave, stern-faced, knowing that none will return alive, though the bodies of the weak will be found in the morning.*

*'Not you.' His father's hand on his arm stops him as he moves to follow the other sons of Gothra. 'You are my successor. The tribe needs you.'*

*'Unhand me, father. It is my right.'*

*'You are not chieftain yet,' his father snarls. 'I am. And my word is law. And my word is no.'*

*He wrenches his arm free and turns his back, taking a step after the other youths swiftly disappearing into the blizzard. He hears the creak of leather but does not turn in time to stop the blow that crashes against the back of his head. He falls, dazed, but the ice cold of the snow on his face rouses him quickly as his father's calloused hands grab his furs.*

*He rolls, pulling his father down into the snow with him.*

*They tumble apart and both rise to a crouch. His father is between him and the proving grounds, his axe in hand, held as a club with the cover still on the blade.*

*'Listen to me, boy,' he growls. 'Our people need you. I cannot lead forever and*

*you are my only child.'*

*He moves quickly, dodging past the axe handle, his booted foot slamming into the knee of his father, snapping bone. His father topples in a fountain of snow, the axe falling from his hand as he clasps his broken leg. At any other time, the injury might not be fatal, but it is the heart of darkwinter. The tribe have to move on to the next raiding territory. There will be no stragglers; no food will be wasted on those that will only become a burden.*

*'This is how I serve our people!'*

*He sets off down the valley and his father's bitter words follow him.*

*'Traitor! They'll kill you!'*

*The youth walks into the swirling snow, the cries of his father falling on deaf ears while the lights ahead grow brighter.*

# DATE IDENT: 887939.M41#1312

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 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.'

# DATE IDENT: 887939.M41#1351

Anti-aircraft turrets pulsed salvoes of blue laser fire into a sky cast mauve by the dull light of Rhamiel's ancient star. Gunships circled at a distance, kept at bay by the weight of fire from the fortress' cannons, while Land Speeders in the distinctive jet black of the Ravenwing screamed back and forth, daring the guns in order to strafe along the walls with heavy bolters and assault cannons.

The Iron Stalagmite the natives of Rhamiel called the defence keep, once the abode of the Imperial commander now ousted by the insurrection from the upper ranks of his military. It could be mistaken for a small mountain, a kilometre high and four kilometres broad at its flared base. A ring of outkeeps and trenches once protected the approaches, but all that was left of them was plasma-blasted slag and cinders. The steep slopes of the three spiralling roads up to the main fortress were littered with the smoking shells of tanks, walkers and self-propelled guns. A few forest-green armoured vehicles of the Dark Angels continued to prowl the ramps to ensure no traitor survived the onslaught.

The summit was a flattened mesa crowned by thick walls and a high central keep. The gates had been closed and the breach in the north wall from the Space Marines' first attack had been rapidly blocked and sealed with vehicle wreckage and debris.

It was here that Naberius fell, lured into a direct aerial assault by the seeming fragility of the walls and lack of firepower – a deliberate ruse ruthlessly enacted with the deaths of thousands of rebels.

Half way up the mount, four companies of Dark Angels encircled the enemy stronghold. Tanks and transports ranging from Rhino personnel carriers to immense Land Raiders were dug in behind berms of broken rock sealed with dark grey spraycrete. Squads of power-armoured Space Marines waited beside

their armoured vehicles, using the lee of the berms to shelter from the sporadic bursts of artillery and rockets that still occasionally spat from the inner grounds of the stronghold.

Part of the line started to move. Responding to their orders, the Dark Angels of the Fourth Company raced into their Rhinos while the engines of Predators and Land Raiders roared into life. Two Thunderhawk gunships descended on plasma jets, their ramps opening as they touched down. A pair of Assault squads mounted the first while Brother Daviel, a four-century veteran interred in the sarcophagus of a massive Dreadnought war machine, boarded the other. From the cupola of his command Land Raider, Master Sheol led his warriors out of their defensive positions, the thunder of whirlwind rocket launchers heralding their attack.

On the flattened summit of the mountain, within the curtain wall, a pulse of lightning and a blast wave of super-compressed air announced the arrival of the first two Terminator squads. The Grand Master and ten of the finest Dark Angels warriors arrived within the rebel stronghold, dispersed over fifty metres of hard ferrocrete. Azrael and Squad Therizon were closest to the citadel, seventy metres from its imposing gatehouse and weapon-topped towers.

Belial and his warriors materialised about a hundred metres to their right, appearing by chance directly within a squad of renegades moving towards the outer wall. The shock wave of the Terminators' arrival threw the enemy soldiers to the ground, several of them twisted and broken by the explosion of forces that delivered the Deathwing to the surface.

The rebels were dressed in dark blue greatcoats and black bascinets with aventails of reflective mesh – they were members of Rhamiel's planetary defence force now turned against the Imperium they were meant to serve. Azrael noticed the badges of allegiance on their helms – winged skulls in the form of the Legion symbol of the Night Lords.

The survivors of the teleport arrival had no time to pick themselves up before Belial and his squad opened fire. The din of storm bolters rang around the courtyard. The fusillade scattered tatters of bloodied fabric and bodies ripped open by bolt detonations.

Azrael's squad moved into formation and his sensorium feed drew on the inputs from the other Terminators to coalesce into a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree representation of the battle zone. The outer wall was twenty metres high, reached by steps and ramps every thirty metres. Pillbox bunkers broke the line of the wall's top every ten metres, filled with enemy soldiers. More rebels manned

bipod- and tripod-mounted heavy weapons at semicircular revetments between the bunkers.

The broken remains of Naberius' Thunderhawk had been dragged inside the walls and dumped unceremoniously on the ferrocrete. The rebels had taken time to paint crude winged skulls across the Dark Angels insignia and the aquila of the Emperor. The sight of such defacing caused Azrael a twist of anguish in his gut, a reminder of what could be happening at that moment to the body of the Supreme Grand Master and the honoured standard of the Chapter. He fixed his attention on their objective, his resolve hardened to the task ahead.

The main citadel was a solid hexagonal building nearly two hundred metres to each wall, soaring a hundred metres above the courtyard. The walls bulged with angular defensive positions, and each corner was reinforced with round towers broken with narrow windows for small-arms fire.

Halftrack vehicles were drawn up in lines beneath armoured canopies some distance to the left. Quadruped battle walkers stood guard by the main gates of the curtain wall – three of them, each with twin turrets mounting heavy cannons. These rose up and turned towards the Terminators that had appeared in their midst, while las-fire and bullets started to rain down from the inner fortress.

'Gate breach!' called Azrael as he moved towards the citadel. Behind, his squad fell in line and as one they raised their storm bolters and poured fire at the closest defenders, their hail of bolts forcing the enemy back from their firing slits above the citadel gates. Through the sensorium Azrael could see Belial's squad had moved to intercept a platoon of rebels pouring from a guard house behind the outer wall. In the corner of his eye he could see the countdown until the teleporters aboard the *Penitent Warrior* had cycled through the recharge phase. Forty-six seconds until the next squads arrived.

The Deathwing moved as a single entity to form a protective ring around Brother Garvel as he strode towards the citadel gates with his thunder hammer. Enemy fire flashed from his raised storm shield and sparked from the armour of the others. Azrael stood next to Therizon and the two of them turned their weapons on the halftracks, scything through the renegades trying to board the vehicles, sparks racing along the armoured hulls of the bulky transports.

Bracing himself, Garvel swung his thunder hammer at the massive metal gates. The impact was like the crack of a storm, a flare of light and a rolling crash that reverberated across the courtyard. Azrael kept his attention focused on the halftracks, where rebel soldiers now skulked behind the vehicles, sniping at Therizon's men with their lasguns.

The walkers opened fire, cannons belching smoke and flame. The shells exploded against the Tactical Dreadnought armour of the Deathwing, rocking Brother Sammeus and engulfing Brother Daellin with broken ferrocrete and shrapnel. As the bitter wind cleared the smoke, the two Terminators emerged from the fume, the assault cannon of the first chewing fist-sized hunks of steel from the armour of the closest walker, the storm bolter of the second rippling fire across the armoured hydraulics powering the walker's legs.

Garvel smashed his hammer against the gates a second time with another explosion of power. The banded metal of the gate flexed; stress fractures ran up its length from the point of impact.

A couple of rebels had managed to crawl up into the cupolas of the halftracks and now swung their heavy machine guns around. A stream of bullets scoured across the ground in front of Azrael, ripping towards the Grand Master in a zig-zag. With bullets shrieking over his breastplate, Azrael levelled his storm bolter at the gunner on the right, the targeting crosshair dancing over the pale face of a woman behind the gunshield. He opened fire and the rebel disappeared from view in a mist of crimson. The machine gun swung upwards, caught in her death grip, emptying its fury into the sky.

Another sharp crack of air brought forth squads Daeron and Balthasar; the former appeared behind the halftracks, the latter a few metres from Squad Belial. Azrael could see movement on the outer wall – traitor officers assessing the threat in the heart of their stronghold, caught between the Deathwing and the approach of Sheol's incoming attack.

The third blow from Garvel's thunder hammer split the gate.

Needing no prompting from their sergeant or Grand Master, Garvel and Luciel swapped places, thunder hammer replaced with field-sheathed chainfist. The teeth of Luciel's weapon growled into a blur and sparks flew as he directed slashing blows at the rent created by Garvel's hammer.

'All squads converge on the gate,' Azrael told his warriors. 'Cover fire against those walkers.'

A burst of missiles from the cyclone launcher in Squad Balthasar flared over the heads of Belial's warriors as they retreated from the continuing barrage of the walking tanks. The warheads detonated against the slanted armour plates of the rebel engines, scattering white-hot shards of shrapnel and broken ceramite.

'Gate breached!' announced Luciel. He tore the last remnant of the broken gate away with the gauntlet of the chainfist and tossed it aside. Dim yellow light seeped from within, fluctuating with the shadows of movement inside.

Azrael stepped closer. An incandescent blast from beyond the shattered portal engulfed Luciel. It was impossible to see exactly what happened in the midst of the blinding light but broken pieces of Tactical Dreadnought armour and burning flesh sprayed across the other members of the squad. As one they poured fire into the breach, firing blind in retaliation.

'Lion's shade, what was that?' exclaimed Brother Galad, his armour pitted with smouldering pieces of adamantium and plasteel.

'Keep firing!' ordered Belial.

Azrael readied the grenade launcher fitted to the back of his power fist. Clenching his fingers, he fired a spread of frag charges through the opening. A second later the blossom of their detonation lit the interior of the gatehouse.

In the split-second of illumination the Grand Master saw a tableau of figures in stark contrast to the shadows of the gatehouse hall, which was a vaulted structure about twenty metres high, the walls unbroken but for an inner portal.

Dark robes obscured overlapping plates of segmented power armour, the defenders' faces hidden behind masks shaped like snarling wolves, eye-lenses like smooth rubies. Arcane machinery sprouted from packs upon their backs, coiled about with thick cables that ran to the guns in their hands. The cerulean pulse of plasma chambers glowed dully through the folds of their robes.

Thanks to the integrated surveyor systems of the sensorium web, the others saw exactly what Azrael witnessed. Alert to the danger, the Terminators withdrew from the breach still firing, while Brother Horst unleashed the fury of his heavy flamer. The burning promethium lapped at the ragged edges of the gate remains and poured into the interior.

'Daeron!'

The sergeant and his squad were moving even as the command left Azrael's lips. Breaking into a lumbering charge the Terminator assault squad pushed into the still-burning breach, thunder hammers and lightning claws crackling with power.

Azrael and Therizon's warriors followed close behind, in time to see Daeron's squad fall on the mechanically augmented defenders. In the glow of guttering flames, their claws sheared and hammers crushed plates of armour, rending and pulping the bodies within. Fractured plasma cells sprayed sparks of cerulean energy that left melt-lines streaked across the outer skin of the Terminators' armoured suits.

'Dark technomancy,' muttered Sergeant Daeron as he crushed the helmeted head of a dead foe beneath his massive boot. 'The foes arrayed against us have

made unholy alliances here.'

'There is certainly a darker purpose,' said Azrael. He surveyed the inner doors, the heavy metal flawlessly sealed, the locking mechanism hidden on the other side.

A hiss attracted his attention and he looked up to see dark gas pouring from vents in the ceiling. His suit's sensors picked up several toxic substances. None of them would be lethal to him even outside of his armour. The acidic compounds in the cloud hissed as they flowed over the Terminators, peeling away enamel and gilding but doing little damage to the ceramite beneath, though an unarmoured attacker may have been swiftly stripped down to muscle and bone. The noxious cloud billowed out through the breached gate.

'Crude,' said Belial, 'and perhaps desperate. They were not expecting teleport attack. Their force is concentrated on the wall.'

'Or they have sealed the citadel for another reason,' said Therizon. 'The Supreme Grand Master's locator is still transmitting.'

Azrael focused his suit's systems, homing in on Naberius' transponder. Through the sensorium he picked up the signal. Due to the interlinked nature of the sensor web, the others found it too. Galad stepped towards the door.

'We must hasten, before something unspeakable happens to our lord's remains.'

'Into a waiting trap, brother?' said Belial. 'The advantage of our surprise arrival is swiftly diminishing.'

'There is not a warrior in this stronghold that can hold against the Deathwing, brother-sergeant,' Galad replied. He slammed his storm bolter against his eagle-embossed plastron. The crash of it rang loudly in the entrance chamber. 'The finest plate of the Chapter, the most skilful warriors. Rhamiel has nothing to threaten us.'

'So the greatest danger is arrogance,' said Belial.

'Wait.' Azrael's calm command cut through the discussion. 'The traitors have to know we are coming for him. We must be wary not to fall to the same hazard as Naberius.'

From the viewpoints of the Terminators still outside he could see that one of the walkers had been destroyed, the others beset by Squad Balthasar who were prying open armour and tearing at hydraulics with their power fists. There was no immediate danger from the courtyard; the troops on the wall were still occupied with the incoming Dark Angels company.

'Balthasar, I want you to seize the outer gate,' he voxed to the sergeant. 'Master Sheol's attack is underway – I'll not have him humbled at the walls.'

*‘By the Lion’s command, it shall be done, Grand Master,’* Balthasar assured him, his visual feed showing his sword plunged into the exposed engine grille of the armoured walker. *‘We’ll hold until Master Sheol arrives.’*

Satisfied that the initial assault was progressing as intended, Azrael tapped into the sensorium feed from the others to triangulate the source of the Supreme Grand Master’s transponder code.

‘Above us, somewhere on the upper levels. Therizon, hold the gate.’ He checked the chronometer. ‘Reinforcement in twenty-three seconds. Sheol’s attack will reach the walls in another minute. When it arrives I want a collapsing cordon – all Deathwing will converge on my signal and reinforce the assault.’

Their affirmatives crackled across the vox.

‘By the Lion’s shade, we shall restore our honour with the blood of our enemies,’ growled Belial.

‘Step aside, brother,’ Garvel told Galad. His thunder hammer flared into life, casting long, wavering shadows across the hall. ‘Let me use my key.’

# DATE IDENT: 887939.M41#1423

Azrael had expected sudden confrontation, an attack the moment they had broken through the inner gate. No such ambuscade came and it was with concern that he led his warriors into the wide hall beyond – a vast space that took up almost the entirety of the lowest floor.

'Their best fighters expend their energy at the walls,' said Galad, 'as I expected.'

'Or they conserve their attack for the most opportune moment,' countered Azrael. 'Watch your sectors, stay alert.'

The sensorium picture grew out of a fuzz of static as sophisticated cogitators assimilated the datafeeds of the Terminators to create a secondary reality of lines and runes over Azrael's view. The citadel extended above and below, reached by elevators and stairwells through doorways at the far end of the hall. Dozens of tertiary readings – probably life signs – flashed along chambers and corridors to either side and above.

'Where is the Supreme Grand Master?' asked Belial. Fluctuating energy readings intermittently obscured the beacon signal from Naberius' armour.

'We secure the conveyors,' said Azrael, pointing ahead. His arm swept round, to the right and then left. 'This is the killzone. Nothing enters that is not destroyed.'

The heavy thud of their tread reverberated around the vaulted space, echoing back from bare ferrocrete walls along which were mounted yellow lanterns like torches in sconces, fed by exposed cabling that crawled over the grey artificial stone. Overhead lumen strips hung from the metal rafters, their dull light barely enough to reach the slabs of the floor.

The Deathwing advanced swiftly, a broad line abreast, weapons angled to cover

the archways and doors to either side. The returns from the sensorium shifted, signals melting away, heading down and beneath the Terminators to flow behind them like the sea churning in the wake of a ship.

'Therizon, watch your rear,' Belial warned.

'We see them,' the other sergeant replied. 'We have your backs.'

Azrael had pushed on in full confidence that the other squads would secure the battle zone behind them. He trusted his sergeants and their squads to fight impeccably, freeing him to concentrate solely on more strategic matters. His thoughts were fixed on the fluctuating sensor beacon from his objective.

'What is the mission, Grand Master?' asked Belial.

'To retrieve the Chapter banner and the corpse of the Supreme Grand Master. We will secure the area and await reinforcement from the Fourth Company. We will then scour the remaining area of all rebels.'

'Understood, brother-captain.'

They continued in silence, unmolested until they reached the far end of the hall some three hundred metres from the entrance.

'Daeron, flank left,' Azrael told the accompanying squad. 'I see an energy cluster about thirty metres away. Possible conveyor control chamber. Investigate. We will secure the transit lobby.'

The assault Terminators peeled away, heading to one of the large archways leading to the surrounding rooms. As the distance increased, the sensorium link wavered. When Sergeant Daeron passed into the adjoining corridor the link was severed, reducing Azrael's input to the Terminators in his immediate vicinity.

'Thermal concentration ahead,' remarked Meritus. 'Could be enemy.'

'Or an environmental heat exchange,' said Azrael as he studied the blur of orange on his display. He motioned for Belial, Meritus and Galad to break right towards one set of doors while he led Turivael and Garvel to another doorway to the left.

Garvel went first with his thunder hammer readied, storm shield raised against possible attack. The door was barely high enough for him to pass through, and his pauldrons scraped the frames as he turned sideways through the doorway.

'Tight fit,' he muttered. 'Barely room to swing a sword.'

The foyer beyond was small, just large enough for Azrael to follow Garvel, the two of them shoulder to shoulder in front of a flight of steps and the doors of an ascender cage. Belial and Meritus arrived at the other end of the corridor, the space filled with their bulk.

The conveyor beside Belial was open and he backed away as far as he could

while he gestured to Azrael.

'I doubt more than one of us could get in there,' said the sergeant.

'If it can take the weight,' added Meritus.

'Perhaps that is the intent of the foe,' said Azrael. 'To divide and isolate us in the close confines.'

Before the others could respond, the sharp crack of bolters rattled in the distance and the vox snarled into life.

*'Targets engaged,'* reported Therizon. *'Nothing dramatic, brother-captain.'*

'Daeron, report,' said Azrael, concerned that the sergeant and his squad were separated from the sensorium link. 'What have you found?'

*'As you suspected, Grand Master, we have located a generator chamber. Oil-fed, very basic. Shall we shut it down?'*

Azrael looked at the small conveyors and then the stairs.

'No, not at present. We will attempt to find a more suitable route to the upper levels. Continue to guard our flank.'

*'Affirmative, Grand Master. The enemy are keeping their distance at present. Will report any significant change.'*

Azrael turned to Belial.

'There must be some means for the citadel to transport heavier loads to the gun turrets. A munitions elevator or similar. Back to the hall – we shall investigate the rooms on the northern side of the fortress.'

They filed back into the central grand chamber and followed Azrael as he headed towards the archway opposite the one by which Daeron's squad had departed. The bareness of the walls disturbed Azrael. Though the Iron Stalagmite was military in origin it was also a seat of planetary governance that would have played host to visiting dignitaries, trade delegations and others. It was too austere for such ceremonies.

He realised the hall must have previously been decorated with banners and other hangings – torn down when the occupants had rebelled against the Imperium. Even so, the lack of slogans and graffiti was at odds with his experience. Dissidents were keen to make their own mark in the vacuum of Imperial sigils, to display their independence and greater power, but there was nothing to denote the allegiance, goals or ideals of the rebels at all.

Did they have an agenda at all, or had they merely been manipulated into uprising by the Night Lords? What precisely had brought the renegades to Rhamiel? The Supreme Grand Master had believed it was the work of the Fallen, the Dark Angels own secret traitors from the dark days of the Horus Heresy. If

that was the case there was still a monumental task ahead: to overthrow the rebels, defeat the Night Lords and, if possible, apprehend the Fallen without involving battle-brothers kept ignorant of their existence.

In the light of such thoughts, Azrael understood a little better Naberius' decision to launch a focused lightning strike against the Iron Stalagmite. The Chapter Master had hoped to deliver a decisive stroke against their foes whilst isolating any potential Fallen involvement. The Deathwing, each First Company veteran already aware of the Fallen's existence, had been on standby to provide a swift response. Similarly the Ravenwing, the mounted Second Company, formed a swift moving cordon to intercept any traitors that might escape the fortress, taking them into custody before they reached the battle-brothers of the main siege line.

It had been a good plan, right up until the moment the Supreme Grand Master's gunship had been shot down.

The corridor beyond the hall was tight, forcing the squad to advance in single file. Belial took the lead, Azrael a couple of metres behind, and the rest of the squad following with Meritus bringing up the rear. The sensorium did not provide much assistance or direction, except to display the rough layout of passageways and chambers, which became increasingly maze-like away from the main hall. There was, however, a broader space fifty metres ahead. It was just inside the citadel's wall. Azrael highlighted this in the sensorium, marking it as their objective.

'A hidden secondary gate, perhaps,' he told the squad. 'Internal loading area with bulk conveyors, I hope.'

'Am I the only one that isn't happy about how easy this has been?' said Cadael. 'Resistance has been virtually non-existent.'

'Stay focused,' said Azrael, though he shared the Terminator's concern. 'If they think to draw us in for ambush, they will not live long to regret the favours they have granted us.'

They continued in silence, moving past storerooms filled with consumables in boxes and sacks. Each chamber was almost full, small walkways left between the piles of stores and sagging shelves.

'They brought in a lot of supplies,' remarked Cadael.

'Preparing for the worst,' said Belial.

'I think they must have been expecting attack before we arrived, brother-sergeant,' Cadael continued. 'It would have taken weeks to gather all of these stores.'

‘That means little,’ the sergeant replied. ‘They have broken from the Imperium – they must have expected some form of retaliation.’

Azrael only half-listened to the ongoing conversation, subconsciously assimilating their exchanges in the same way he monitored the occasional vox chatter and reports from the other squads. He was occupied with the same issues that Naberius must have wrestled with. As Grand Master of the Deathwing he was well acquainted with the necessity to prevent knowledge of the Fallen spreading too far through the Chapter. It had been his duty on several occasions to directly intercede to ensure that his warriors were present at a crucial moment to spirit away the offending traitor.

But it had been Naberius’ strategy that had engineered such opportunity. Now that he was confronted with the reality of the potential task – to win a military campaign whilst hamstrung by the need for secrecy at the highest level – Azrael found the proposition daunting.

A fluctuation on the sensorium pulled him out of his thoughts. The squad had reached a T-junction. A wider corridor, broad enough for two Terminators abreast, ran across their line of approach, with the objective just ten metres further on. The passage to the left continued for about thirty metres before a turn to bring it alongside the outer wall.

His attention had been drawn by an energy surge that rippled through the surrounding rooms. The others had seen it and instinctively paused in their advance. Belial took a few paces towards their objective while Azrael turned left to cover the opposite approach. He could see nothing in the standard visual spectrum, but the overlaid rendition of the sensorium picked out a tracery of orange and yellow power feeds that snaked along and through the walls ahead.

A buzzing started, low and indistinct. He could not isolate the source; it was emanating from the ceiling and walls, in front and behind.

‘Can you hear that? Can you see that?’ asked Meritus. The Deathwing Terminator covered the corridor along which they had advanced, and via the sensorium Azrael could see a shadow creeping slowly up the passageway towards Meritus. ‘I think I’m experiencing a malfunction.’

‘I hear it, brother,’ replied Galad. ‘We all can.’

The darkness was not a thing in itself, but the absence of the power grid. This was no shutdown – no immediate cessation of supply. It was as though something was moving along the conduits, devouring the electricity within. In its wake the sensorium went dark as well, just flickers of sound and the occasional spark like a distant star.

‘Emperor’s throne, it’s... eating the light!’ Meritus’ exclamation was dramatic, impossible, but accurate. The shadow had reached the extent of his suit lamps, twenty metres ahead, but the beams from the high-powered lumens of his armour simply stopped as though hitting a black wall. A wall that was edging closer, a few centimetres every second.

‘Shall I open fire, Grand Master?’

‘Test rounds, four rapid,’ Azrael replied, monitoring the other sensor feeds. The shadow was definitely originating from a single source rather than approaching from multiple directions.

The bark of Meritus’ storm bolter was sharp and loud. The four shells shrieked down the corridor. Their propellant sparks blinked out and then disappeared into a black veil, their detonation suppressed or enveloped by the encroaching shadow.

‘Sergeant Daeron, report.’ Azrael kept the command short, forcing a calmness he did not feel. ‘Therizon, what is your situation?’

Static replied.

‘Movement!’

Belial’s warning startled them all, their fixation on the shadow delaying their reactions for a split second. The sergeant opened fire. Through the shared visual feed Azrael glimpsed a flutter of robe and a pale face a second before three bolt-round detonations blossomed brightly in the gloom. The sensorium was suddenly alive with signals, approaching from ahead of Azrael and Belial. Only darkness remained behind the squad.

‘I swear something’s in there,’ whispered Meritus. ‘Something moving in the dark.’

The darkness was a spear of nothingness on the sensorium, depleting everything around it, surrounded by an aura of sonic diffusions and visual blackness. Where sensor readings remained, the life signs tripled and then quadrupled over the course of several seconds – masses of rebels pouring up and down from the levels around the Terminators.

The squad opened fire as more figures appeared at the extremity of visual range, the whip-crack of las-blasts searing down the corridor from both directions. Azrael could make them out more clearly now – dressed in robes rather than combat fatigues, their heads hooded and masked like those at the citadel gate. That the hail of bolts that greeted them had not slain them all stood testament to the armour concealed beneath their robes.

‘More hereteks,’ he said to the others. ‘Blasphemers against the Machine God.’

‘Traitors of all types deserve nothing but scorn,’ replied Galad. ‘Their particular delusion is irrelevant.’

‘But not their capabilities,’ said Belial. His sword flashed with a pulse of blue. ‘Prepare for close assault.’

‘Grand Master?’ Meritus was subdued. If Azrael hadn’t known it to be impossible, he would have thought the warrior was afraid. He could understand the battle-brother’s concern. The darkness was ten metres from the Terminators, obliterating all scans of everything beyond it. It was like staring into a bottomless abyss, a maw that threatened to swallow everything. ‘Orders, Grand Master?’

‘Belial, lead the assault.’ Azrael opened fire again, targeting the helmed heads of his foes. Two fell to the salvo, a third forced back into the cover of a doorway. Beyond them a handful more levelled their weapons and unleashed a flurry of las-bolts. ‘I shall hold this flank. Meritus, withdraw to my position.’

‘Gratitude, Grand Master,’ replied the veteran warrior. He moved backwards, storm bolter still raised against the slowly incoming wave of blackness.

‘Garvel, on my left,’ snapped Belial, waving the other Terminator forward with his sword. The field of Garvel’s thunder hammer crackled sporadically, blue light glinting from fittings and cables along the walls.

The two Terminators advanced shoulder to shoulder. Belial kept up bursts of fire from his storm bolter; Garvel had his shield raised against the intermittent las-fire that returned. A coruscating ball of plasma screamed down the passageway, glancing across Belial’s shoulder. The blast erupted into a spray of cerulean energy, bathing the Terminator and wall with a pulse of power.

# DATE IDENT: 887939.M41#1441

‘Cover fire!’ barked Azrael.

Cadael opened up past his reeling sergeant, firing on full automatic for several seconds while his squad leader recovered from the plasma impact. A handful of hereteks retreated from the furious blaze of bolts.

Azrael was aware of Meritus just behind before the heavy thud of steps sounded through his suit’s auto-senses. The sensorium and a decade of experience fighting together joined them beyond the physical – they shared senses and knew each other’s manner and instincts intimately. The Grand Master steeled himself against the infectious discomfort that flowed from Meritus’ unease.

‘Some kind of anti-tech pulse field, I warrant,’ Azrael said to calm his companion. He fired at movement to his left, a flurry of bolts that turned a stone doorway to a cloud of flying shards.

‘Of course, Grand Master,’ Meritus replied, unconvinced. ‘Very likely. Nothing arcane or unnatural at all.’

The crash of Garvel’s thunder hammer resounded down the corridor, swiftly followed by the higher pitched crackle of Belial’s power sword and a scream cut short. Azrael had to reload.

‘Swap positions,’ he told Meritus. ‘Hold them back.’

The two Terminators rotated around each other like a single mechanism, leaving Meritus free to continue firing at the hereteks. Azrael came face to face with the approaching shadow. While he ejected his weapon’s magazine and pushed home another, he studied the wall of blackness. It was hard to remain objective, as though an aura of menace preceded the dark wave.

The sensorium had no reading from the shadow, so he was forced to estimate its

distance. Seven-point-five metres. Another flare of plasma brightened the feed from Garvel and the Terminator cursed, falling to one knee as his leg armour gave way under the strike. Immediately Cadael was there, standing over his battle-brother, his fist smashing aside a heretek lunging at the Terminators with a serrated axe.

Azrael fought against the distraction and tried to focus on the edge of the cloud where it touched the wall. From the lack of data picked up by the sensorium, he knew the field, or whatever it was, extended through the ferrocrete and into the surrounding rooms for several metres.

He fired a grenade. The charge arced onwards until it met the shadow and then vanished. He waited, and two seconds later heard the faintest of noises, almost a sigh that issued from the blackness.

Belial hewed the helmeted head from a heretek as he reported.

'Passage to the objective is secured, Grand Master.'

He and Cadael were at the doors to the large room Azrael hoped was some kind of conveyor chamber. From what he could see on the sensorium scan, once they were in there would be no other way out. The hereteks seemed content to allow them into the room, perhaps knowing they would be trapped there until the energy-eater reached them.

'Hold the line.' Azrael fired a flurry of grenades at the shadow-wall and ran towards it with storm bolter blazing. 'I shall return.'

His outstretched power fist touched the blackness. Warning sigils and a piercing whine exploded through his war-plate as systems overloaded. The stacked crystal core of the reactor burned at one hundred and fifty per cent for almost a second to compensate for the sudden energy drain.

Azrael could feel himself slowing, the servos and artificial muscles of his Tactical Dreadnought armour shutting down as the shadow swallowed up its power. Like a vampire, the darkness leeched everything from the suit – sensorium, locomotive and environmental systems blacked out in rapid succession.

For a heartbeat, and then another, nothingness swamped Azrael. There was no feedback from his armour at all, but he could smell his own sweat inside his helm, taste the metal of the suit. He could see his eyes reflected in the red lenses just centimetres in front, devoid of head-up display and sensorium readings.

It was like losing a limb; the jacks and sockets of his black carapace that linked him to the armour became cold metal embedded in his flesh. Not painful, but suddenly stark against the warmth of his own body.

As he had thought, momentum took him onwards and just two seconds after entering the shadow the impetus of his charge carried him free of it again.

The sudden light and sound was blinding and deafening, the whine from his suit as power once more surged through its limbs like a welcome clarion. His bolts and grenades exploded just a few metres ahead, ripping across a tangle of wires and metal just a little narrower than the corridor itself, a metre and a half tall.

A trio of hereteks stood behind the device, which continued to slowly grind forward on metal tracks. He saw their eyes widen with fear in the visors of their wolf-masks, as they reached for long-barrelled pistols hanging in holsters beneath their robes.

He fired high. The first bolt took the nearest heretek in the face and turned her mask into hot shards, flinging her back with a piercing shriek. The second had started to duck but two bolts caught the top of his head, ripping his cranium apart from within, the blast partially contained by his hood so that as he fell a slick of broken skull and gobbets of flesh coated the inside of the rough cloth.

The third did not flinch as a bolt whirred over his shoulder. Azrael had time to register the strange ruby-like gem that tipped the pistol – rather than a muzzle or las-lens – a moment before a spark no bigger than a thumbnail hit him in the chest.

Though not large, the shot dug deep through the layers of metal and ceramite. The discharge of energy carved open his breastplate like the swipe of a lightning claw. Scorching pain lanced through Azrael's pectoral but he pulled the trigger as he stumbled back and his next two shots found their mark in the heretek's chest. Two bright explosions tore open his robes and scattered blood-spattered scales into the air.

Blood bubbled from the wound in Azrael's chest, quickly solidifying as modified cells clotted the injury.

There were more hereteks behind the shadowcaster, but the bulk of the machine was between them and the Grand Master, blocking their lines of fire.

With a grunt, Azrael heaved a shoulder into the metal plate fronting the machine. Its tracks squealed and screeched on the hard floor as snarling engines fought against the powerful fibre bundles of the Grand Master's warplate. Its momentum, though slow, was implacable and it continued to push forwards, sliding Azrael back across the ferrocrete floor. Detecting a loss of traction, his suit responded, jutting slender memesteel spines from the soles of his boots. The spikes dug ragged grooves in the stone until they found purchase.

The growl of the shadowcaster's engines grew to a loud whine. Past the

armoured shield Azrael could see robed figures clambering onto the engine block and track housings. He stowed his storm bolter against his greave with a clang of its magnetic clamp and grabbed the bottom of the frontisplate with his now free hand.

'Boost to servos,' he told his armour and it responded immediately, the hum of its stacked crystal core reactor becoming a pulsing buzz. A temporary surge of power flooded the Terminator suit's limbs and spinal hydraulics.

Azrael straightened his knees and lifted the front of the shadowcaster. As its tracks rose from the floor it lost traction, and the Grand Master's task grew easier with each passing moment. With a shout, Azrael hauled the diabolic engine up, turning it as he did so to tip aside the hereteks climbing along its length.

Metal screeched and tore as he continued to tilt the shadowcaster. He toppled the bulky machine onto a handful of techno-cultists, its weight crushing them to a paste across the unforgiving floor. Tracks whirred against the bodies of those on the other side, dragging robes and limbs into drive wheels, grating flesh and bone against the wall.

Azrael pushed. With no force to act against the power of his armour, he broke into a run, using the overturned shadowcaster as a ram to flatten even more hereteks that had been following behind the bizarre field generator. Their screams and panicked cries were silenced as the engine crashed through them like a runaway heavy loader.

Twenty metres and more than a score of dead enemies later, the shadowcaster crashed against the wall of a junction, mashing another trio of cultists to pulp against shattering stones. Sparks flared from the shadow generator and flames burst from ruptured lubricant lines. In seconds the entire infernal machine was engulfed in green flames.

Able to utilise the sensorium again, Azrael saw that his companions were beset from three sides – the scanner relay showed their beacons as a few bright dots amongst a sea of energy signals. The chamber to which they had been heading was as full as the corridor, which had been empty thirty seconds earlier, indicating that the rebels had some means to arrive at the ground level.

Further afield more Deathwing squads approached from the main hall – Squads Therizon and Karolus. Daeron's men were still out of range.

'Daeron, status report,' Azrael voxed as he started back towards Squad Belial.

*'A few attacks. Nothing troubling, Grand Master. I think they are just trying to keep us occupied for the moment.'*

‘The citadel shield generator is still operational. Link up with Karolus and locate its source. I want that shield down in five minutes.’

*‘Affirmative, Grand Master. We’ll follow the energy grid and do a sweep from here.’*

# DATE IDENT: 887939.M41#1444

Arriving back at the arterial corridor, Azrael was confronted by an anarchic scene. The hereteks had pushed through the fusillades of the Terminators and an intense close assault raged on both flanks. Belial's power sword swept back and forth with relentless precise strokes. The crackle and crash of power fists landing body-shattering blows punctuated the shouts and shrieks of the techno-cultists.

The hereteks thrashed and slashed with all manner of weapons, from simple crowbars to whirring chainblades and field-wreathed claws on mechanical tentacles. Many had considerable bionic and augmetic replacements and pounded the Deathwing with piston-like arms and additional blade-tipped appendages.

The press of bodies was tight and the corridor gave the Terminators little room to manoeuvre. With two warriors holding each flank, there was nowhere for Azrael to move forwards. He fired a few shots, picking off hereteks with sparkling arc-cutters and lasdrills literally crawling over the armour of Meritus and Garvel.

'Belial, Cadael, push past the door and allow me to secure it,' he instructed as he advanced towards the sergeant. 'Garvel and Meritus, fall back to the new position.'

Belial lopped the head from another foe and advanced, using the mass of his armour to push his enemies back. Cadael's fist slammed through a pair of cultists lunging through the door to the objective while his bolter salvo chewed through more inside the room. In the moment of relent he followed his sergeant, storm bolter blazing, giving Azrael room to reach the doorway.

The Grand Master lingered for a moment at the entrance, taking stock of his surroundings before stepping over the threshold. The corpses of several dozen

hereteks littered the floor of the chamber, their blood and limbs strewn haphazardly over scratched and broken flagstones. As Azrael had suspected, the far wall was in fact a large gate, counterbraced with metre-thick bars and locked with heavy wheels.

The hereteks had plenty of cover from boxes and containers piled across the loading bay – cover from which they sniped and threw grenades at the Grand Master. His chest still ached from the strange blast of the heretek, and as he returned fire he picked out the most ostentatiously dressed foes and targeted them first on the assumption they might be leaders armed with similar weapons. Bolts scoured along crates and barrels, splinters of metal and wood added to the storm of shrapnel from the explosive rounds.

Two conveyor carriages lay open to his left, each large enough to carry three or four Terminators. Not ideal, but workable. Certainly better than the stairs.

'Squad Belial to my position. We go up.' Azrael switched to the company vox channel. 'Status reports. Daeron, have you located the field generator? Therizon, what is your position? Balthasar, is the main gate secured?'

*'We have located a power source two levels down that may be the generator, Grand Master. Ninety seconds until we arrive.'*

'You have sixty,' Azrael replied.

*'Ground floor main hall and access secured, Grand Master. Three squads pushing down in flank positions to Daeron and Karolus. We have the conveyors and stairwell within the cordon. Flamer operations ongoing at other ingress points.'*

*'We have the gate, but the Fourth Company are making heavy work of the approach, Lord Azrael. The enemy have broken away from their engagement with the Third Company and are countering along the south-eastern flank of Master Sheol's advance. We are surrounded – we cannot remain here for long. Master Nadael is suggesting that the Third break position in support of Sheol's squads to speed the attack.'*

'No, we are not committing to full assault at this point,' Azrael snapped back. He adjusted the vox frequency again and advanced towards the closest hereteks as he spoke. His power fist turned the piping they had been sheltering behind to crumpled steel. Two bursts from his storm bolter cut down the exposed rebels. 'Sheol, can you break through to the walls within two minutes?'

*'They have sally bunkers hidden from the initial scan, and retracting tank traps. The crossfire is increasing,'* the captain of the Fourth Company replied. *'I could reach the walls within that time frame, but expect casualties to be at ten or even*

*fifteen per cent.'*

Azrael bit back a frustrated curse, remembering that he was now in overall command. Properly investing and then assaulting the Iron Stalagmite had never been part of the strategy – it would be too costly for dubious benefit when a couple of companies could just as easily contain any threat with a siegework. While the morale of the Chapter was important, the retrieval of Naberius' remains and the Chapter banner was starting to look like a false errand.

'Sixty seconds to make significant progress, otherwise withdraw to pre-assault positions.' Azrael moved to the right as Belial and Meritus came into the loading chamber, forming a firing line that swept clear everything in front of the conveyors. He switched back to the Deathwing channel. 'Balthasar, if the Fourth do not reach you in the next minute, break out and form up with the other perimeter squads for a move back to the citadel.'

*'Understood, Grand Master.'*

Galad and Garvel turned right as they entered, firing on the move while Cadael held back the hereteks at the door.

Azrael heard the ring of a bell and one of the conveyors started to close.

'Proximity fuse,' he snapped and fired a frag charge into the gap between the closing doors. 'Brother Tezalion?'

*'Yes, Grand Master?'* replied the Techmarine attached to Squad Caulderain.

'I need you to find the conveyor controls and override them.'

*'We're already en route, Grand Master,'* Sergeant Caulderain assured his commander. *'One level below you. Thirty seconds until we secure the controls.'*

A brief thump and flash on the sensorium highlighted the detonation of the frag charge as rebels opened the conveyor some distance above. Azrael crashed through the remains of another barricade, always moving, his fist and storm bolter in constant action. Belial was at his shoulder, his weapons cleaving an equally bloody path.

*'Grand Master, this is Sheol. We cannot reach the walls.'*

'Understood, brother-captain. Continue to engage force on the perimeter to cover the withdrawal of Squad Balthasar and then return to siege positions.'

'The sooner we leave here, the better, Grand Master,' said Cadael.

'I concur, brother.'

Azrael was about to switch to the company channel to order a convergence on the citadel gate when they reached the entrance to the docked conveyor. Naberius' beacon signal was almost directly above.

To Azrael's surprise it pulsed faintly, an indication of continuing lifesigns.

Intermittent and weak, but real. No longer a theoretical, morale-boosting objective, now Naberius was once more a living, breathing battle-brother. If the thought of the hereteks despoiling the Supreme Grand Master's body had galvanised him, the notion that they held him prisoner was like a threat to his own life, his purpose of existence. The Grand Master's hearts pounded faster in response, flooding his body with a surge of energy.

He was not the only one.

'By the Angels, the Chapter Master is alive!' Brother Galad strode towards the closed conveyor doors, his power fist raised as though he might smash them down with a single blow. The others exclaimed their own surprise.

'I don't understand,' said Cadael. 'We had a confirmed sighting of his death.'

'From a wounded brother,' replied Garvel. 'Now dead himself.'

'Or not,' said Azrael.

The welter of stimulants swelling up through Azrael, both hormonal and artificial, brought everything into a slow, sharp focus. The need to act filled him; an overwhelming desire to be on the move took him to the threshold of the open conveyor before he stopped. He forced himself to assess the situation with a critical eye, riding the wave of battle euphoria, using it to speed his thought processes and observations rather than letting it sweep him on without conscious thought.

'If Naberius survives, others of his command squad might also be alive.' He addressed his company again, speaking quickly but clearly. 'All squad commands attend for mission reprioritisation. Squad Belial and I will retrieve Supreme Grand Master Naberius and the Chapter banner. Primary objective is to secure and destroy the field generator. Secondary objective is to maintain possession of the conveyor controls. If we cannot succeed in the first for teleport extraction, we will require the second. Sergeants Therizon and Balthasar have command in my absence. Organise task forces and deployment as dictated by local conditions.'

Having failed to prevent the Terminators reaching the conveyors, the hereteks had withdrawn a short distance to regroup. A few continued to snipe at Cadael from doorways and columns along the access corridor. The crunching of gears and the grumble of an engine somewhere at the top of the second conveyor shaft announced the return journey of the carriage.

'Tezalion, are you at the controls?'

*'Negative, Grand Master. I have not yet accessed the control panel.'*

Azrael pointed at the descending conveyor and the squad formed a rough

semicircle, storm bolters and heavy flamer readied. With a creak and bang the conveyor reached the ground floor.

'Annihilate whatever is inside,' Belial told his squad.

The doors wheezed open to reveal a hulking creature that almost filled the cage, twice as big as even the Terminators, its bulbous head cocked to one side beneath the ceiling of the carriage. It wore a robe like the other hereteks, dark red and stained with oil streaks, marked with solder burns. Such flesh that showed was dark grey, coated with long wiry hairs. Pistons hissed as it tensed to leap out of the cage with long simian arms outstretched towards Belial, lips drawn back to expose finger-length fangs.

The crash of simultaneous storm bolter fire was deafening. A dozen bolts hit the brute in the next seconds, shredding its face and chest, almost decapitating it.

The huge body flopped out of the conveyor; the grisly remains of its head slapped wetly against the ferrocrete just a few centimetres from Belial's boots. The sergeant stamped down on the remains of the head and drove his sword into the spine.

'Better to be sure,' he told the others, pulling his sword free from severed vertebrae.

While Meritus dragged the carcass clear, Azrael inspected the inside of the cage. The metal sheeting was pocked with shrapnel marks from his grenade and there was congealed blood spattered by the doorway. He spotted an ear in one corner, oddly intact and incongruent.

*'Grand Master, Tezalion here. I have overridden the conveyor controls. Where do you want to go?'*

# DATE IDENT: 887939.M41#1452

The clatter of the conveyor's chains echoed along the shaft, the whine of ancient gears in accompaniment. Azrael tried not to fixate on the pulsing beacon from Naberius' war-plate, now only twenty-five metres above. A flurry of confused energy and life signals masked the exact location, but betrayed a concerning amount of activity in the upper levels of the citadel.

'Retribution will be ours, Grand Master,' Belial assured him.

It was strange to find comfort in the words of his junior, but Azrael took heart from them all the same. The sergeant had a manner about him that exuded precision and confidence, both excellent qualities in a leader.

'Have you ever thought about becoming a Master, Belial? Naberius' loss would require a redressing of the ranks. I would happily nominate you for command of a company.'

'Ambition is a distraction, Grand Master.'

'But we exist to serve, sergeant. To command is a duty as well as an honour.'

'And if I am called upon to command, I will accept. But I cannot say in honesty that I desire it, because I do not. I am content in whatever role suits the Chapter.'

Fifty metres above. The conveyor was swaying a little now, the clank of the chains louder in the dwindling space above.

'Did you desire it? Command. Did you strive for it, Grand Master?' Belial's question was quiet, respectful and entirely unexpected. It took Azrael a second to compose a suitable reply.

'No. I was born to it, brother.'

They rattled the last few dozen metres to the level where Naberius' signal was strongest. Belial dragged aside the lever to activate the brakes and the contraption shuddered to a halt. The sensorium was thick with returns; heat,

light, sound all merged together. A tracery of energy cables and light fittings, environment systems and door controls created a wire-frame reality within the datastream that outlined a small antechamber and then a large hall. The details blurred beyond twenty metres but the pulse from the Supreme Grand Master's armour was irresistibly strong.

'The Lion wills it,' said Azrael. He activated the door rune and the cage squealed open.

The antechamber was only a little wider than the conveyor, and about ten metres long. It was lavishly decorated and furnished, at odds with the militaristic surrounds of the rest of the fortress and compound. A chandelier sparkled overhead, thick carpet underfoot as Azrael stepped out.

Wooden benches and tables had been upended to provide cover for a score of defenders. These were a mix of the hereteks they had encountered on the lower level and the renegade forces that manned the Iron Stalagmite's outer defences.

A rage of bullets and las-blasts screamed into the open conveyor, bouncing and hissing from the Terminators and walls. Azrael opened fire as he forced himself into the storm, directing a trail of bolts that ripped through a trio of rebels sheltering behind an upturned table directly ahead.

Belial fired past his commander, turning a sofa to kindling and torn upholstery, leaving those it had sheltered bloodily smeared across the pastel-coloured wallpaper behind.

The doors ahead opened and more soldiers fired from beyond, using the frame as cover. Azrael replied with a long burst from his storm bolter, each explosive impact turning the plastered wall to dust, punching through in a shower of deadly wood and brick splinters.

The whine of the second conveyor announced its arrival, a second before the rest of Belial's squad burst into the close confines, their storm bolters unerringly seeking the defenders. Volleys of fire spat past centimetres away from the Grand Master and sergeant, never at risk of hitting them.

Azrael trusted his battle-brothers to clear the room in his wake and did not pause in his advance. Long strides took him to the doorway where the remains of five soldiers were piled. Another tried to slam one of the doors against him. His powerfist swung out, turning the wood to splinters that tore open the man's face and throat and sent him reeling back with a gurgling cry.

The space beyond the door was dark, and only by the artificial projection of the sensorium was Azrael able to see that it extended almost a hundred metres towards the centre of the citadel. A maze of smaller chambers and corridors

surrounded it – private rooms, storage areas and service access.

Naberius' signal was a bright star in the centre of it all, drawing Azrael on like a siren. He almost did not notice the soldiers arrayed along both sides of the hall, nor the blistering fire that sparked from his plate.

He activated his suit lamps and their blinding light bathed the hall. Flinching from the glare, the rebels were easy targets – the steady pound of rounds from the Grand Master's storm bolter cut down a dozen foes in the next few seconds. Writhing tentacle-like cables and pipework covered the walls and ceiling and coiled across the floor like serpents. Puffs of vapour and gasses issued from grilled maws, and blinking coloured lights seemed to stare back at the Grand Master from within loops of semi-organic technology.

Advancing a few more paces, Azrael brought the light to the further reaches of the hall. What he saw made him falter in his next step.

Naberius was held up in a web of iron spines and ribbed pipes, his armour broken and his flesh pierced in many places. His helm lay in the blood-spattered coils below, as did the broken haft of the Chapter banner, the standard itself draped over the undulating mass, burned and stained.

His eyes were open, pale circles in a mask of crimson from a steadily weeping wound across his brow. Something had been daubed over his head, oily and glistening, and it ran in black tears down his cheeks. The Supreme Grand Master silently mouthed something, lips and jaw moving in the same manner again and again.

More techno-cultists surrounded the ghastly vision, their wolf-masks pushed back to reveal sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. One amongst them had golden robes – clearly their leader. A shock of white hair fell from his balding scalp almost to his waist, as he stood before Naberius' half-corpse with arms outstretched. In one hand he held a serpent-hafted rod with a cog-shaped head; in the other, a three-tined dagger with blades that shimmered and moved as if alive.

They did not turn, intent upon their ceremony, oblivious to the violence that erupted around them. As more Deathwing moved into the hall the storm of bolts grew intense, a near-constant barrage of fire that turned men, women and machines to ruin.

Azrael opened fire on the chief cultists. His bolts flared across the divide and then stopped a metre from their target. They hung in the air until their propellant burned out, and then clattered to the floor.

The technomage did not turn.

The horrific scene had so consumed Azrael he only just noticed the surge of

signals on the sensorium. A swirling immaterial vortex appeared to his right, beyond one of the doorways, its centre a mass of spiralling stars and sickly hues. Hulking warriors materialised from the depths, motes of power dancing from their armour as they strode from the immaterial breach.

They were as large as the Deathwing – traitor legionaries in Cataphractii Terminator suits older than the Imperium itself. Their livery, amongst the baroque gold stylings and plain metal and ceramite of patchwork repairs, was a midnight blue. Shimmers of lightning crawled over the plates as though trapped in the enamel.

Night Lords, despotic servants of the Dark Powers, architects of the Rhamiel revolt.

The Deathwing and traitors opened fire together; rounds from combi-bolters and storm bolters flashed past each other in the glare of suit lamps to spark from walls and armour. Ceramite splinters showered from the impacts as the two forces traded fusillades at point-blank range.

Azrael turned his weapon on the Night Lords but continued his advance towards the tech-cultists, Belial and his squad moving with him.

A bass growl issued from the left, causing another squad of power-armoured Night Lords to part like a stormy wave. From the pulsing warp portal behind them, a blocky shadow even larger than the Terminators eclipsed the light and the floor resounded with a monotonous heavy tread.

With a metallic screech, a Dreadnought tore through the reality barrier and paused at the threshold. The walker filled the space with its massive armoured form. Its central sarcophagus was rendered with an embossed image of a skeleton with bat wings, arms folded across its chestbone, as though a grotesque mockery of the Angel of Death found in so many of the Dark Angels' designs.

It was armed with two scythe-like claws that gleamed red with a shimmering energy field, bathing the lightning-wreathed armour of its body with ruddy light. It looked hunched, if such a thing was possible, almost off balance as it lumbered into the hall. It paused a few metres from the heretek cabal and let out a piercing mechanical shriek, a scream of insane rage that filled the hall.

The Night Lords squad behind it turned their bolters and missile launcher upon the Deathwing, catching them in a crossfire with the traitor Cataphractii on the other side of the hall. The Dreadnought loomed over Azrael, glittering battle-scythes sweeping back and forth as it charged.

The Grand Master avoided the first blade as best he could, but his armour was too heavy to allow him to elude the second. The crackling edge lashed across his

pauldron, scoring deep through the armour, biting into the crux terminatus honour badge that adorned it.

He grabbed at the flailing weapon with his power fist and the fingers of the huge gauntlet clamped around reticulated links. Servo matched servo with hisses and whines as the Dreadnought tried to wrench its weapon free, its own bulk blocking the attack of its opposite limb. Clawed feet dug into the stone floor and tertiary clamping talons flicked out to set the legs in place. With a burst of vapours from ornate exhaust stacks, the warped battle engine pivoted at the waist, dragging Azrael sideways towards the Cataphractii.

Meritus and Cadael charged the traitors, throwing themselves bodily at their opponents with power fists swinging. Garvel followed behind, the first swipe of his thunder hammer taking a renegade square in the chest with a concussive explosion of power.

Belial strode past Azrael, power sword in hand, his storm bolter directed at the second squad of Night Lords to the left. The Dreadnought detected his approach and flicked out a scythe-blade with a metallic snarl, but too late to catch the Deathwing sergeant. Belial's blade rang against the plated sheath of the leg, throwing up sparks and leaving a deep welt in the armour.

He struck two more blows, each strong enough to slay a man but of little use against the thick armour of the war machine. The Dreadnought snarled and backed away, trying again to slash open the sergeant with a powered scythe, tugging and wrenching at Azrael to free its other weapon.

A fresh flurry of bolts from the doorway announced the arrival of Squad Balthasar. Manael's assault cannon snarled, followed by the rapid bark of a reaper autocannon carried by one of the renegades. Their shells shrieked past each other across the hall.

'Your orders were to secure the field generator, sergeant,' Azrael snapped, adjusting his weight as the Dreadnought changed tactic and lumbered towards him, trying to bear him down with its mass.

'You gave me independent command, Grand Master,' the sergeant replied as his squad fanned out behind a wall of fire directed at the Night Lords in power armour. 'Therizon and three squads are securing the generator now – it'll be destroyed in the next sixty seconds. I thought you might need assistance – you have not been answering the vox.'

In retrospect, Azrael realised he had heard nothing from the others for two minutes, having been too focused on Naberius' continued survival. The sensorium was working, but there was a buzz at the outer edges of the scanner

screen – some kind of interference from the hereteks.

'Give me an opening, Grand Master!' said Belial, now behind the Dreadnought.

Azrael complied without thought. He relinquished his hold on the Dreadnought's scythe and manoeuvred past its shoulder to slam his fist into the weaker armour beneath its engine. Ceramite cracked and splintered from the first blow and disintegrated at the second.

With a roar, the Dreadnought ripped up its feet and turned. Though the scythe did not catch Azrael, the articulated arm smashed into his chest, knocking him to his back with a crash. The Night Lord war engine took a step closer, arm drawn back for a second swing.

Belial lanced his sword two-handed into the breach made by Azrael's power fist, driving his blade to the hilt. The Dreadnought spasmed as the blade penetrated the internal sarcophagus, piercing the mortal remains of the traitor Space Marine within.

Azrael lifted his fist to ward away the blade as it slashed down, the blow a little wide of the mark as the pilot's death spasms twitched the war machine's limbs. The scythe glanced across the back of the Grand Master's power fist, the flare of competing fields giving off a blinding flash. The weapon's tip dug into the broken remnants of Azrael's pauldron to embed into the flesh of his shoulder.

With a last shudder, the Dreadnought settled, pilot dead.

'The hereteks!' Azrael snapped as Belial stepped past the war engine to assist his Grand Master. 'Naberius comes first.'

Balthasar's squad were halfway up the hall by now, providing cover fire for Azrael as he prised the Dreadnought's blade out of his arm. Blood bubbled up from the wound and pain made his fingers spasm as he first rolled to one side and then awkwardly pushed himself up from the floor.

Belial's squad was locked in battle with the Cataphractii – two Night Lords were down but so too was Cadael, armour torn from chest to throat, exposed body turned to bloody rags and splintered bone.

Sergeant Belial was at the circle of hereteks, raining blows against the invisible wall that surrounded them, striking empty air like a maniac. Azrael moved up beside him and slammed his fist towards the chief cultist. His blow stopped half a metre from its target, encountering impossible resistance that rapidly slowed the attack rather than stopped it sharply. Pulling his fist back again was like dragging at a heavy weight.

'Grand Master!' Balthasar's shout drew his attention to the sensorium, through which he saw a spark of energy crackle in the air behind the defeated

Dreadnought. It flickered and started to expand.

'This isn't working, sergeant,' Azrael told Belial as the sergeant swung two-handed at the invisible barrier.

He stepped back to survey the hall more closely, seeking inspiration. Balthasar's squad had driven back the Night Lords on the left, but were in turn being held at bay by the hissing blasts of a melta-gun, powerful enough to cut through even Tactical Dreadnought armour with a single shot. Meritus and Garvel had been forced to withdraw by the arrival of more Cataphractii. With another portal about to open, the tide of battle was most definitely not moving in favour of the Deathwing.

'We cannot go through,' said Azrael, vocalising his thoughts to help focus them. He fired a grenade, its trajectory directed towards the centre of the hereteks' circle, but it stopped some distance above, just like the bolts, its detonation spraying outwards from the shield that protected them. 'We cannot go over...'

His eye was drawn back to the gaunt features of Supreme Grand Master Naberius. For just an instant their eyes met, and in that moment Azrael saw... nothing. The dead stare that returned his gaze held nothing of the warrior he knew. It was a look of unthinking coldness, and betrayed the final indignity inflicted by the hereteks.

'He's not alive,' Azrael told Belial. His gaze moved to the cables and pipes that kept the Supreme Grand Master suspended in the air. 'Not truly. They are keeping his body operational, nothing more.'

'A trap, the bait for us,' Belial replied, reaching the same conclusion as his commander. 'One that we were too willing to spring for them.'

'Naberius shall have the final vengeance, brother,' Azrael said grimly. 'Vox-capture, code Vanguard-eight-four-alpha.'

+Vox-capture recognised+ appeared in his display.

'Command authority override. Transmit to signal alpha. Terminus override.'

The pulse of Naberius' life signs became a fixed point in the sensorium, accompanied by a constant hum of recognition from the Terminator suit's machine spirit.

+Terminus override signal ready to transmit.+

'Transmit.'

It took three seconds for the core of the Supreme Grand Master's power pack to overload, too swift for the hereteks to recognise what was happening. One moment they stood in a circle around their prize, trusting to their archeotech and

Night Lord allies to protect them. The next, a fireball exploded from their captive, incinerating everything within a three-metre radius.

Flesh turned to ash, robes burst into flame and reflective armour became glassy slag by the core detonation. The effect on the shield was instantaneous, and the last remnants of the shock wave passed over Belial and Azrael as a wash of heat and light.

With the deaths of the hereteks the vox-blocking mechanism was also destroyed. The comm channels burst into life with a chatter of signals, one of them insistent above all the others.

*'...have lock on to your position. Ready to teleport. Grand Master Azrael, this is the* Penitent Warrior *awaiting your command. We have lock on to your position. Ready to t–'*

'*Penitent Warrior*! This is Azrael. Immediate withdrawal, all Deathwing squads, standard hierarchy.' He stepped over the smoking remnants of the techno-cultists and dragged the ash-strewn remains of the Chapter banner from beneath the body of their leader. Little more than a square metre of it remained, the splayed feathers of a white wing. Yet it was enough; it had survived. There was a lesson in that. 'All squads, prepare for extraction.'

# PART TWO

# DATE IDENT: 627819.M41

*The singing in his head has almost stopped.*

*Almost.*

*He realises it hasn't; he has simply ceased to listen. Its mellifluous tones, its constant strokes of praise and demands for adoration are part of the background hum of his thoughts, ever present like the armour that encloses him or the twilight of the deep mines of Truan IX.*

*He keeps the siren lure at bay with his own voice, fixes on every word that he speaks as if it is a cliff edge on which he is hanging. He not only sings the hymnals, he feels them, pulls them in to his soul as a ward against the accusations and mockery of the thing that has destroyed his battle-brothers.*

*No, it did not destroy his brothers. It made them destroy each other with its fake threats and false promises. Only he has survived. Only he remains to avenge them. Four days have passed since Master Batheus and the others died. Four days since he started his hunt for the creature. Four days alone against the unceasing voice.*

*The litanies continue even as he roams the lower shafts seeking its lair. Every canticle and verse he can recall becomes his armoury, until the teachings of the Chaplains are exhausted. He then begins the Lessons of the Armorium, and feels a quiver of rage run through the walls as he starts the Rites of Bolter Sanctification.*

*The las-scorched walls and floor are bare here, the litter of miners' bodies and those of his battle-brothers far behind. Soon even the touch of the ore-workers disappears, to leave only virgin stone for him to follow.*

*His continuous muttering moves on to the Seven Chantings of Activation for the engine of a Land Raider. As he recites the Third Chanting – the Release of the*

*Invocating Rune of Gears – he spies a gleam ahead, a shimmer of gold that, when he turns to gaze upon it fully, is more of a darker shadow.*

*He lost his helm during the fighting against his squad-brothers. Or removed it after, he is no longer sure. Perhaps he took it off to listen to the song all the better, unfiltered by the machinery of his auto-senses.*

*The soulmusic is so pure, so invigorating, it lifts him...*

*'And on the Fourth Chanting thou shalt ignite the Battery Connections with the activation of the Rune of Power. By its inverted red triangular shape shall it be known, located on the thoracic converter panel on the left of the driver's station,' he calls out. His voice rises to a bellow, the words almost meaningless, but better than outright defiance of the whispering threats, for he has learnt that to engage, to confront is only an invitation to a wave of paranoia. 'If the Rune of Power be active already, recourse must be made to rectify the negative flow!'*

*His pace quickens as he nears the source of the gold-shadow aura – a natural cavern that swiftly expands from a branch of the tunnel to his right.*

*The cave is not large, no more than thirty metres across, and half that in height. The darkness here is almost total, yet shot through with golden sparks that hover on the edge of vision. His breath comes in chill clouds, though until he entered the cave the temperature had slowly increased with each level descended.*

*He activates the lamp of his war-plate and reveals a circle of eight pillars that rise from floor to ceiling, veins of crystal through them that reflect the yellow beam.*

*Within the ring of columns, something stirs.*

*It is the shadow incarnate, an auric gleam at its heart that briefly shines and then dims again as its bulk moves. It does not turn like a living thing but shifts its presence, coiling about itself until a cluster of amber-gem eyes regard him with their inhuman stare.*

*The soulsong has become a mewling, pleading entreaty full of sorrow and loneliness.*

*'Pathetic,' he growls as he circles the pillars, his bolter levelled at the creature, his combat knife in the other hand. Spare ammunition and grenades salvaged from the others clank and scrape as he paces. 'You make yourself pitiable? I am a Space Marine of the Dark Angels. I have no pity.'*

*The thing lashes out at him, materialising a tentacle of darkness about a golden thread that whips between the columns and strikes him on the shoulder. Its touch passes through his armour, leaving a burning welt inside the flesh and bone, a gnawing pain that is as much psychic as physical.*

*He staggers backwards, the agony in his hearts as much as his shoulder, as though his body is suffused with the manifested disappointment and hurt of a spurned child. Swallowing hard, he ducks the next lashing blow, but is not swift enough to avoid a third, which coils about his leg for an instant before evaporating, sending the chill of abandonment and scything wasp stings coursing through his mind and body.*

*A glancing touch from another tendril caresses his throat, robbing him of his voice. He spits and coughs even as anxiety and an overwhelming need for approval swamp his thoughts. He thinks of his superiors, of the Lion and the Emperor, and knows shame at the thought that he will fail them. The pressure is almost too much, the weight of expectation of ten millennia of Dark Angels ranged upon his shoulders. He is unworthy of the title, dishonouring the name of the Chapter.*

*But it is surrender to the xenos that would be failure – all other fates, even death, are acceptable.*

*That shame hardens into anger; the warp-induced despair becomes hatred. The creature has been luring him closer, herding him nearer and nearer to the columns with its lashing blows as though steering a yoked beast with flicks of a whip.*

*He looks around the chamber and sees the pillars pulsing, flaring into life each time a shadowy appendage passes between them. The floor and ceiling are marked with more crystalline shapes, half-seen but faintly gleaming.*

*'This is not your lair,' he snarls through a fresh surge of pain when another questing tendril slides through his gut. 'It is your prison! Someone brought you here, wanted to use you, and you killed them. You want to be free? Not here, not in my world. You'll feed on no more of the Emperor's servants.'*

*He opens fire and bolts blaze into the shadow-beast. It reels and squirms, throws more flailing tentacles towards him. He meets them with the edge of the knife, slashing through insubstantial limbs.*

*The voice of Master Batheus roars in his thoughts, commanding him to lay down his weapons. He hesitates for an instant on instinct, a moment in which the creature renews its assault, leaving lacerations across his cheek and temple with another whip-crack blow.*

*Having emptied his bolter, he thrusts home another magazine. He fires again, knowing that his shots have little effect. He continues to shoot; the act of fighting invigorates him, gives him purpose and muscle-memory focus even as the warp-beast's lamentations and urgings drag at his thoughts and try to force his*

*surrender.*

*Rolling beneath a pair of lashing whips of darkness, his attention is again drawn to the pillars. Where his gaze passes close to one of the stone columns it seems he can see the creature more substantially. The stone is imbued with some peculiar quality, an aura that extends a distance from the surface through which he is looking at the creature's real form.*

*He rolls again and fires, testing a theory. The bolt passes close to the pillar and disappears. A moment later a surge of anger and pain rolls out from the inner cave, slapping him aside like a fly, his armour cracking and clattering as he slams into the wall. Something in his leg snaps on landing. Even with the support of his armour and the pain-killing elixirs that flood his veins, he can barely stand.*

*A rapid succession of tentacles explode between the nearest two columns, striking him across the chest and face. It feels as though his hearts are being ripped out, his brain turning to hot embers at their touch.*

*'Not enough,' he says through gritted teeth. He limps through the next attack, thoughts fixed on the apparition within the pillars. 'Not nearly enough!'*

*He reaches the closest column and half falls into it. Resting on one shoulder, shuddering as a tendril slides up and down and through the back of his leg, he pulls an explosive charge from his belt and drives it into the stone.*

*The assault stops.*

*In the discombobulating silence that follows, he almost forgets himself. So hard has he been concentrating on forcing back the creature's thoughts, he almost opens himself up, like a pugilist that overextends and becomes unbalanced. Fresh whimpering and pleading course into his mind, seeking some image, some thought to latch onto that will stir his empathy and compassion.*

*He laughs and staggers to the next pillar with a fresh explosive in hand.*

*'Find only my hate!'*

*Around the circle he continues, alternately assaulted and cajoled and tempted and caressed by the shadow monster. His leg feels shattered in a thousand places, his ribs a solid mass of pain, his hearts thundering lumps of solid stone in his chest.*

*He thrusts in the final explosive just as a new sensation sweeps into him, of brotherly concern, of a father's stern admonishment.*

*The song becomes a bombastic insistence demanding that he stop, cursing his existence. A moment later warnings and worries assail him. The song is one of fraternal bond again, but it is a lament for both of their deaths and he*

*understands what the creature intends. He looks again at the ceiling and sees the cracks in the rock, the whole chamber held up only by the pillars.*

*He knows then that he has won. He detonates the charges.*

*The whole world falls. As the rocks tumble, two pillars form an angle as more and more debris crashes down, spilling to either side in drifts of crushing rock. He throws himself between the toppling columns and slides to a halt beneath the furthest as it falls into its neighbour.*

*Amongst the tempest of tumbling mine workings he hears a drawn out roar of rage and frustration that eventually diminishes into the rumble of falling rocks.*

*Crouched between the crumbling pillars, he waits for the assault on his senses to end. For several minutes the ground shakes and the tumult continues, to the point that he wonders if it is not perhaps some fresh attack from the creature, that he has failed to despatch it back to the warp.*

*The space left is barely large enough for him to spread his elbows and he cannot stand. The throb from his leg is insistent. He welcomes it, the clarity of the pain, as he welcomes the silence in his thoughts.*

*He is alone.*

*There is no way out and the rest of the force from the Third Company has been killed by the miners or each other. He is the last and will probably die here, unremarked. It does not matter. He has done his duty, and if he is to perish in this lonely sarcophagus he is content with that.*

*He has no regrets.*

# DATE IDENT: 935939.M41

Many times before, Azrael had met Chief Librarian Ezekiel, either on the field of battle or across the table of the council chamber. Always the Holder of the Keys had seemed aloof, concerned with matters beyond the immediate and mundane.

Now Ezekiel was entirely fixated upon Azrael, and it was not a pleasant sensation. In the half-light of the catacombs beneath the Tower of Angels the Librarian's bionic eye was a glimmering ruby that regarded Azrael with unblinking intensity. Like the Grand Master, the commander of the Librarius had removed his armour and was dressed in a ceremonial robe – in Ezekiel's case in the blue of the Librarians, for Azrael the bone white used by the Deathwing – with a black tabard marked with the sigils of the Inner Circle.

'Are you ready, Azrael?' The Librarian's soft, informal tone took Azrael aback.

'I don't know,' he confessed with a glance at the forbidding shadows that lay beyond the rune-marked archway behind Ezekiel. 'I have no idea what to expect, so how can I be prepared?'

Ezekiel nodded in acceptance of this answer, head slightly to one side.

'It is not necessary to undertake this ritual yet,' said the Librarian. 'The council have backed your temporary elevation to Supreme Grand Master. The campaign on Rhamiel continues.'

'I need to know,' Azrael replied, a little too quickly, eliciting a frown from Ezekiel. The Librarian said nothing, but his expression made it clear he expected Azrael to explain himself. 'At the end, when we fought the Night Lords and... When I killed Naberius, I had a moment of doubt. Was I doing it for him, for the Chapter, or myself? If I understand it correctly, this trial will provide the truth.'

'That it will, Azrael.' The Librarian became solemn. 'Every Supreme Grand

Master must undertake the Passing of the Gates, as proof of their commitment to the Dark Angels and the Inner Circle.'

'Have any failed? Did they forfeit their honour? Their lives?'

'I would not tell you if they had.'

Azrael absorbed this without comment.

'I have seen two previous Grand Masters through this ceremony. Your predecessor, and his. Both proved themselves worthy. You knew both – do you judge yourself a lesser warrior, a lesser leader, a lesser man than they?'

Azrael took a breath and looked the Librarian in his good eye.

'I have the correct qualities. I would court false modesty to say otherwise. But I do not claim anything else.' Azrael squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. 'When does the trial start?'

Ezekiel shifted his weight, moving slightly so that Azrael could see past him and into the darkness beyond the archway. Two pairs of lights hovered a metre or so above the ground, pinpricks of bright red.

Eyes, Azrael realised. Watchers in the Dark.

'It's already begun?'

Ezekiel nodded and turned away.

'Follow me, Azrael.'

The Grand Master fell into step behind Ezekiel and matched his slow, ceremonial pace. He could see nothing of the Watchers. The Librarian paused at the archway, one foot inside the shadows, the rest of him still in the flickering light of the torches in the sconces upon the walls of the entrance chamber. Azrael could feel the heat from the flames on his hands and face, and equally the chill draught that emanated from the corridor ahead. The breeze brought with it a musty smell of long centuries, though Ezekiel had just admitted he had passed this way with Naberius less than half a century earlier.

'We step into the Corridors of Shadows,' Ezekiel intoned. He started forwards again and in a moment was lost in the darkness, all sight and sound of him vanished.

Azrael followed without hesitation. He quickly read the inscription on the keystone of the arch as he passed beneath.

'Walk the shadows. Bring the light.'

He found it heartening, the thought that he might be the beacon, the bringer of hope to the despairing, the incarnation of justice and truth.

As the darkness swallowed him he realised how naive that might seem to others. His skin prickled as the last heat of the brands evaporated and he was left

in total blackness. He resisted the urge to look back, to check the flames still burned behind him.

'I am the light,' he whispered and continued on, blinded but not blind.

The darkness reminded him of the blanketing effect of the shadowcaster used by the Rhamiel rebels. It was all-concealing, so that three strides in he saw not a glimmer from behind nor any light ahead, and there was no sound but for the thud of his hearts and the whisper of his own breath.

Was it a similar technology at work here? He had wondered at the mysteries that surrounded much of the Inner Circle's workings, of the labyrinthine catacombs that existed below the Tower of Angels, beyond the cells where the Interrogator-Chaplains did their bloody work. How much was simply the archeotech of the lost generations, shrouded in ritual? There were treasures and perils in equal measure in the deepest levels, in the dungeons where forays by the Techmarines still occasionally ventured to glean secrets from buried chambers, risking life and sanity to bring them back.

As if a switch had been flicked, he stepped into light again. Blinking, he focused on Ezekiel, standing to his right in front of a narrow hanging. The banner depicted the Angel of Death, as did so many of the Chapter's standards. Yet instead of a sword held in gauntleted hands, the hooded figure clasped a chain on the end of which hung a red rose. He remembered his tutelage as a novice, that the red rose signified blood, the sacrifice of the Lion and the Emperor.

He was about to speak, but chose to keep his silence, aware that the occasion required a certain degree of solemnity. To speak seemed a violation of the proceedings.

'This is the Portal of Penumbral Sorrow,' Ezekiel said quietly, motioning towards a heavy wooden door opposite Azrael. 'The light becomes darkness. It is the boundary between what was and what shall be. To step through is a declaration of your intent, a move from the past to the future, a remoulding of the man you are into the man you must be.'

As before, the lintel was carved with old letters, so worn now that Azrael took a few seconds to decipher them.

'Bring the light. Cast the shadow.'

It was not such an encouraging thought. A duality. A summation of the role of the Supreme Grand Master, to be both the bearer of the Chapter's great burden but also its greatest hope of absolution.

He nodded his understanding. Ezekiel stepped forwards and clasped the iron

ring of the door. He looked intently at Azrael, eye never leaving the Grand Master as the Librarian silently pulled the door open.

There were more shadows beyond, but of a conventional nature – a gloom rather than utter darkness. Azrael stepped through the door with a swift stride and felt Ezekiel follow him a few paces behind. With the softest of clicks the door shut and the darkness increased.

A faint warmth came off the stones to either side, the passage little wider than his shoulders.

He sought no explanation beyond the mundane – they had to be close to the heat exchangers of the Rock's plasma cores. The depths of the massive asteroid-fortress were riddled with energy conduits, coolant pipes and thermal vents, more than enough to conjure strange changes in temperature from one place to the next.

He felt rather than saw a larger space opening up around them. His footfalls disappeared into the distance. His eyes grew accustomed to the dark and he realised that there was a massive window above the passage by which he had entered, the light of the stars filtered through the ancient panes of coloured plasglass. By the twilight he could just make out the symbol of the Chapter on the floor – a winged sword against a circle of red.

From every direction an amber glow suffused the chamber, emanating from more than a dozen different archways and open doors. Corridors ran away from the hall at uneven intervals like spokes from a hub. He turned his head left and right, trying to count the entrances, but it was hard to focus; there seemed more or less each time he looked.

One moment the light was ambient, an ochre gleam; the next it was present, a circle of small lanterns, each born by a Watcher in the Dark. The light spilled across the flagstones but did not reach far, serving only to accentuate the shadows more than dispel them.

He heard footsteps before he saw the others. Each arrived behind a Watcher. Cowls hid their faces but he knew them immediately all the same – their tabards bore their company colours and the icons of their specialities: Masters, Chaplains and Librarians.

One of the robed warriors stepped closer, a large censer swinging from a chain in his hands. The burner was crafted from red-lacquered metal in the shape of a rose. He recognised the voice of Dagonet – the sigils on his tabard confirmed the identity of the Master of Sanctity.

'One has come who would be master of all,' Dagonet intoned with a swing of

the burner. Acrid smoke swept over Azrael, stinging his eyes, thick in his nostrils. ‘One has come who would be servant to all.’

A chance movement gave him a look at Dagonet’s face beneath his cowl. Just a glimpse, but it was enough for Azrael to see that the Master of Sanctity’s eyes were glassy, their stare fixed at some point beyond the would-be Supreme Grand Master.

‘One has come,’ the others chanted in unison as Dagonet withdrew to the circle in a billowing white cloud of incense. Their voices were flat, their timing perfect.

‘Are they asleep?’ Azrael looked to Ezekiel for an answer but the Chief of the Librarius had moved to the circle, one among the many for the moment.

‘They fulfil their roles.’

Azrael turned at the sound of Sapphon’s voice, one of the Interrogator-Chaplains. He located him by the sigils on his tabard, but there was no sign he was any more aware of what was going on than Dagonet or Ezekiel.

Seeking explanation, his eye moved across the hall again. With an effort, he focused on one of the Watchers, and realised he had almost forgotten their presence. Even as he thought of them his mind slipped away, forgetting the question for which he sought answers.

A master in jet black took three strides forward – Sammael, commander of the Ravenwing. In his hand he held a black feather as long as a man’s arm. He stretched out his hand, the feather balanced on its tip in his palm, unstirred by the breeze Azrael could feel coming from over his shoulder.

‘One has come who would seize the shadows,’ Sammael chanted.

Azrael felt that he should take the feather in response, but when he reached out his hand the black plume turned to smoke between his fingers.

‘One has come who would lead the shadows,’ the Master of the Ravenwing continued.

‘One has come,’ chorused the remaining members of the Inner Circle.

Ezekiel was the next to approach, his one good eye flecked with gold as it glared through Azrael. The Chief of Librarians seemed shrouded in shadows; darkness hung from his robe like a cloak. Or like wings, flowing from his shoulders, ready to bear him up like the Angel of Death so revered by the Chapter.

‘One has come who would see the unseen.’ The Librarian held out his hands and the shadow rippled along his arms to his fingertips.

By unconscious prompt, Azrael turned his back on Ezekiel and he felt the touch

of his companion on his shoulders, as though setting a great weight upon them. He could feel the cold embrace of the shadow behind him, a chill that suffused his body. Even as the sensation faded, the chamber seemed to brighten around him. Like a veil lifted from his eyes he saw the many passages and doors that linked together in the chamber.

'One has come who will guide the unseen.'

'One has come.'

Azrael blinked. In the moment when his eyes were closed, something changed. He had been staring at an empty wall. An instant later he stood before a huge archway three times his height, its keystone embossed with the head of a roaring lion. More startling still, the arch was flanked by two Dreadnoughts, each war machine a stark white, where a split second before had been nothing.

'They are the Wardens in White,' said Ezekiel, his voice returned to his own. Azrael glanced back and saw that there were no others in the chamber – no others that he could see, he reminded himself.

The armoured forms of the Dreadnoughts were heavy with ornate scrollwork and paintings of the Chapter iconography, their sarcophagi decorated with stylised versions of the Angel of Death. Scores of wax and parchment seals had been attached to them, and from their weapons hung small banners of plain black cloth.

'What are their names?'

'None can remember and no book records them,' answered Ezekiel. 'They are the last guardians of the Rock. Only the Supreme Grand Masters have passed beyond the Chamber of Passageways.

'I am Hope,' said the Dreadnought on the left.

'I am Despair,' said the other.

'If you have the strength, dare tread the path between us,' they intoned together.

Azrael nodded and took a step forwards. Ezekiel stopped him with a hand on his arm.

'You will need this,' the Librarian told him. He gestured to one side to draw Azrael's attention to a Watcher in the Dark, who bore a scabbarded sword in its gloved hands. It lifted the weapon to the Grand Master and he took it.

'The *Sword of Secrets*?' He freed the blade, the keen-edged sword in one hand, sheath in the other. 'But I thought it lost with Naberius.'

Ezekiel's look and silence was non-committal. Azrael wondered if Naberius had asked the same questions, made the same remarks when he had been presented with his predecessor's weapon – the Heavenfall blade that was the

badge of the highest commander of the Unforgiven.

Another question nagged at Azrael but went unvoiced as he stepped between the Wardens in White. Why would he need a sword?

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

The corridor from the Chamber of Passageways was no more than ten paces long and ended in a plain wooden door. There was no handle or lock, but it opened as Azrael approached.

A bitter wind swept over him, numbing his face in a moment. The crack of bolters had him raising the *Sword of Secrets* the moment he stepped through, alert to danger. He found himself on the ramp of a Rhino transport; behind him came a squad of warriors clad in the icons of the Third Company.

Space Marines swept past him into the teeth of vicious fire from traitor war engines dug in along the snowy ridge ahead. Thunderhawks roared overhead and more Rhinos crashed to a halt on the bank of the frozen lake to disgorge other warriors of the Third Company into the assault, the fire of Predators and Land Raiders flashing past.

The ice fields of Soloo.

He lowered the sword and watched himself leading his squad, fresh to the rank of sergeant. He directed their fire towards a bunker on the hill. The squad's lascannon spat beams of white death, while their bolters chewed at the ferrocrete pillbox. Missiles and battlecannon shells from the circling gunships crashed down, obliterating a hundred metres of razorwire, trenches and fortifications in a firestorm of plasma, shrapnel and promethium. Dark Talon aircraft swept down, their rift cannons tearing holes in reality, shredding what little remained of the defenders.

The scene slowed, explosions blossoming along the front, las-blasts and bullets searing past Sergeant Azrael and his Space Marines. It stopped, frozen in a moment of time.

'What is this?' Azrael demanded, stalking through the fire and fountains of

snow, particles of smoke and dirt hanging on the air.

*A moment*, whispered a voice.

He looked around but saw nothing.

*A moment of weakness*, the voice continued. Azrael followed what seemed to be the direction of its source and came up beside the apparition of himself. The incarnation of his memory was blurred slightly, though everything around him was sharp and stark. The voice seemed to issue from his frozen counterpart.

'Not weakness – assessment,' Azrael replied, recalling the moment to which the voice referred.

*The line of advance was cleared. You did not advance. Hesitation.*

'Inexperience. I took a few seconds longer than I should have to verify that the bombardment had been successful.'

*See the missile*.

He knew it was there, its vapour trailing from a crippled walker to the left. He had spotted it the moment the scene had frozen.

'It will kill Brother Kasper,' Azrael admitted. 'Had we moved forward earlier we would have seen the walker and targeted it with the lascannon. This is not new. I have revisited this scene a dozen times over the centuries. But the past cannot be changed. And the future is not set. Kasper may have lived but another died a minute later if we had not been delayed calling for the Apothecary to extract his gene-seed.'

His surroundings boomed into life again, and two seconds later the anti-tank missile struck Kasper below the arm, punching through his armour and into the side of his chest cavity before it detonated its warhead. The explosion almost turned his thorax inside out, coating his battle-brothers with gore and splinters of bone.

But Azrael did not have to watch; he remembered it already. His gaze was fixed on himself, on the memory of himself. Sergeant Azrael was halfway out of the crater, attention fixed on the enemy in front.

The blaze of the missile engulfed Azrael, and when it faded the vignette had changed. Soloo was gone, replaced by a dark sky across which blazed a purple comet. Drop pods screamed down through the clear heavens, each a growing star of plasma.

One pod, retros firing, landed directly on top of him. He resisted the instinct to flinch, told himself it was simply a hallucination. With a crash the drop pod smashed into the ground atop his position, but he remained unharmed, the reconstructed memory unfolding around him.

He found himself, bounding from the drop alcove as the restraints fell away, bolter in hand. This was before Soloo, before Truan, the Cargenesis Ultimatum and so many other battles.

'Athenia V, my first ever engagement as a full battle-brother. I acquitted myself well that night.'

*Arrogance*.

He followed the voice to himself once more, pounded across the blackened earth a few paces behind the newly ascended Brother Azrael. His marksmanship was efficient, clean, each burst of fire finding an ork amongst the green-skinned tide rousing from its camp towards the drop assault. He remembered seeing the banner of Master Tydroth amongst the fury of battle.

History paused again.

'Is that it?' Azrael pointed to the red and gold standard. 'You think it arrogant to look upon the banner of my commander and be inspired.'

*Ambition*, whispered the breeze.

'Aspiration. They are not the same thing.'

*You have ascended to the highest rank of the Chapter. Your aspirations have brought you as far as they can.*

'It is only the beginning of a new battle,' Azrael replied. He gestured with the sword, encompassing the fury of the greenskins disgorging from the rough shacks and tents, sweeping it across the green-armoured Space Marines deploying from their drop pods. 'Just like this. Becoming Supreme Grand Master does not crown my achievements – it redefines them. What came before is done, part of the journey that brought me here. It means nothing to my future conduct. The war before me is the one I must win.'

The memory played out as he recalled. He kept at the shoulder of Sergeant Raxiel as he had been told, and fired relentlessly at the oncoming xenos filth. Concentrated aggression ensured that not a single ork came within fifty metres of the squad as they pressed on, forming a tight knot with several other squads as they reached the scattered hovels that denoted the outskirts of the ork settlement.

Sergeant Raxiel sent half the squad to clear the nearest outbuilding, Azrael amongst them. The Grand Master recalled vividly that there was nothing inside, but followed after his former self as he vaulted through the window.

Rather than landing on the dirty floor of the hovel, Azrael found himself in snow again, this time almost to his knees.

The wind keened down a desolate valley, not a single tree or bush to halt its progress. On the crest ahead rough banners flapped from crooked poles. Several

dozen fur-clad warriors waited there, hammers and axes and shields in hand. A drummer started a slow, steady beat and they advanced through the snow towards the valley floor.

A matching rhythm from behind caused Azrael to turn. Another group of barbaric fighters descended from the opposite slope, beneath banners of bloodstained leather.

'I was not here. I do not remember this,' he said, watching the two warbands approach, sliding over the snow as much as pushing through it.

*You have been persuaded to forget*, the wind told him.

He scoured the line of faces to each side, trying to recognise anything, but nothing came to mind. He strode forwards, snow gripping his legs, seeking something familiar – an enemy face, a shield design or weapon. There was nothing.

Behind the warbands came two more groups, smaller in number. They were youths, wiry and hard-eyed, but none more than twelve or thirteen Terran years old.

Now he saw himself. Not from conscious memory, but a vague recollection that he could not define. He held a length of wood edged with bone shards, almost as tall as he was. Thick leather protected his arms and chest, his legs free of armour. The better to move through the snow, though he could not say how he recalled such a fact.

He made a leap of judgement, based on what he had already seen.

'You are showing me moments of transition,' Azrael told the Watchers, for surely it was they that had engineered this memorial construct. 'I assume this is my first battle.'

The wind said nothing.

The two warbands broke into charges with throaty bellows of hate, while the youths forged through the snows towards each other for their own separate battle. It was hard to watch with detachment as his young self squared up against a girl of similar age from the opposing tribe, a maul of fire-hardened wood in one hand, a sharpened stake in her other. He had no connection from memory, and on an intellectual level understood that he would be victorious – but in his enforced ignorance he could not help but want his young self to do well and was eager to see events unfold.

Child-Azrael swung wildly, his bone-axe missing the girl by a wide margin. The girl, a vicious grin on her face, punched him in the jaw and knocked him into the snow. The youth threw himself sideways as she swung her club, and

scrambled through the snow with his enemy in pursuit, legs pumping as he struggled to find purchase in the white drifts.

He regained his feet just in time, weapon raised to block the descending club. The girl's sharpened stick found his leg, and Grand Master Azrael winced as blood poured through the thick fur of his younger self's leggings – his leg twinged as if in memory, though he had no conscious recollection of the event.

The wound only incensed the young warrior. Azrael felt pride as the youth launched a blistering assault, swiping his axe at the girl again and again, ducking and dodging her return swings.

His foot caught on something under the snow. A rock, perhaps. He stumbled, falling into the upswing of his foe's club. Its tip caught his mouth, slamming his head backwards. He flailed in the snow, stunned, weapon falling from numb fingers.

The girl stood over him. He wiped a hand over his mouth, smearing blood across his cheek and arm, still dazed. She pulled back the club.

A stone hit her in the temple and she toppled, falling across his legs with eyes glazed. Another boy shouted, pointing at the unconscious girl, insistent, his meaning clear. His younger self picked himself up, still groggy, and retrieved his bone-axe.

'No,' whispered Azrael. He stalked towards the young version of himself. 'The victory is yours. There is no honour in her death.'

The scene froze with boy-Azrael poised to smash in the head of the defenceless girl.

*What is honour?*

'Avoiding needless slaughter.'

*It is a weakness. It is indulgent mercy cloaked in ritual.*

'It is a code, the reason we fight. If not for honour, we are simply killers. Honour shapes our cause.'

*Honour is false. Victory is all.*

'Did I spare her?' he demanded, standing over the pair of young warriors. They seemed so small to him.

*Does it matter?*

The snow was falling fast; thick clots of white filled the air. The scene began to waver, to pale before his eyes.

'Did I kill her?' he growled, head turning left and right to seek the perpetrator of this torment. 'I do not remember! Show me!'

He wanted to reach out and snatch the axe from his young hand, but he knew it

was simply an apparition, not reality. He could not change what had passed. Was that the point?

'Why do you remind me of these events? What accusations are you trying to make?'

The white was almost complete around him, the paleness an all-encompassing aura of diffused light, like being inside the shell of an egg. The light flickered and divided. His eyes focused again and the light resolved into several lights, becoming yellow and orange.

A dozen candles on sconces on the wall around him.

He was in a circular chamber of rough stone blocks. No doors. He looked up and down. No trapdoors or grates or other means of exit.

An oubliette.

In the shadow beneath each candle stood a Watcher in the Dark. Red eyes regarded him with unblinking stares.

'These are your doubts? Hesitation, arrogance, mercy? These are my sins by which I'll be judged.'

*We do not judge. We watch.*

'Why did you choose these visions? If not accusations, what are they supposed to mean?'

*We did not choose them.*

'That makes no sense.' He turned from one Watcher to the next, but they seemed identical, even to the folds and creases of their robes. 'Why confront me with these moments from my life if they have no meaning?'

*So that you understand*.

He was not sure what to do next. Had he already failed the trial? Was this prison to be the last thing he saw, slowly starving and dying of thirst? He examined the stones again, ran his hands over their surface. They were real enough, cool to the touch, with patches of lichen in places.

He approached one of the Watchers, but could get no closer than three paces from it – when he took another step it was as though the room shifted and the Watcher was another pace further away without moving. The chamber adjusted around him as he turned on his heel and started towards another. Watchers and candles remained just out of reach, so that it seemed as if he and they were immobile and the stones revolved around them.

He checked every surface again, but there was no crack or weakness in the stones of the walls or floor and the ceiling was out of reach. Azrael waited, staring at the figure of a Watcher, trying to see what lay beneath the hood,

though not quite sure he wished to know.

The lack of action gnawed at him.

'What do you want?' he shouted, turning about on his heel, staring at his captors. 'What do you want of me?'

There was no reaction, not even a flicker of recognition.

The Dark Angel examined one of the candles, as close as he could. It flickered like a flame, but the wax did not melt. After some time – time he lost track of despite his innate Space Marine temporal sense – he was sure he saw a pattern, a repetition. The candle flame looked like a hololith on a loop a few minutes long.

Was time really passing? Was he caught in some kind of stasis chamber?

This thought sent a surge of adrenaline through him and he fought against the overwhelming desire to act, to *do* something.

It was a test, he reminded himself. Everything was part of the trials.

'Patience,' he muttered even as the urge to slam his fists against the wall gripped him.

For how long would he have to wait until their intent was revealed? How long had he already been here?

Azrael returned to the centre of the oubliette and sat cross-legged on the floor. The Grand Master had forgotten he was carrying the *Sword of Secrets* still. He sheathed it and placed the scabbard across his lap. Fingers knitted together, he rested his hands on the sword and contemplated his surroundings, trying to remain calm.

There certainly was no way in or out, other than by the machination of the Watchers in the Dark. He turned his attention to the sword. Ezekiel had said he would need it. Was he meant to attack the Watchers? To prise or dig his way out?

Another idea occurred to him. Time passed here, but what of the world outside these walls. What was the rest of the Inner Circle doing?

Waiting for his return. Or... had he failed? Was this not the test but the consequence of his shortcomings?

Was he to remain here forever while another took up the rank of Supreme Grand Master? Surely previous aspirants had been found wanting.

'I am not infallible,' he said.

Was it a test of acceptance? To settle for this fate rather than command? What drove him to desire his freedom? Duty? Self-aggrandisement? Arrogance?

'I failed.' His voice was a hoarse whisper, choked with the realisation. He swallowed hard and did not look at the Watchers. Azrael felt the desire to plead his case again, to argue against their judgement, but he remained silent all the

same.

Was that pride? A stubborn glee from his own martyrdom?

How long had he been here? How much longer would he have to endure?

Until dehydration killed him. Even with his post-human physique he could survive for only a few days without water. His body would start to cannibalise itself in the last twenty-four hours as it desperately sought to survive – as though it were another organism apart from the creature that was Azrael.

Madness would likely claim him. All the training and psycho-conditioning could do nothing against the physiologically-created manias that would assail him. Body chemistry, altered or not, ruled the mind more than willpower.

Such an end was ignoble, the nadir of what he had desired for his life. Reduced to animalistic craving and insensible delusions when he had fought so hard for nobility and civilisation.

Azrael slid the sword partway from the scabbard, exposing about half a metre of shining blade. Looking at the keen edge, a darker thought occurred.

Was this a quicker, more noble death?

Ezekiel was the most powerful psyker of the Chapter. He must have seen something in Azrael's future – or lack. It had been an act of mercy to pass him the sword.

How long? How long to make that decision? Was his resistance to the temptation the proof required by the Watchers?

He hated all of the questions that wracked his thoughts, despised himself for his need to know these things. More evidence of pride being in control. It was not his choice; he was the instrument, the tool, the weapon.

The weapon... Azrael's gaze moved back to the blade. His reflection seemed haggard, cheeks sunken, hair grey. He had been here far longer than he had realised. Or the madness had already begun conjuring phantoms of his own fears.

He looked up, suddenly convinced that he was alone. The Watchers regarded him impassively.

He could endure no more scrutiny.

Perhaps the quicker way.

But it had not yet come to that end. Azrael did not give up easily, and he was not about to surrender to despair at the first setback.

He slammed the *Sword of Secrets* back into its scabbard and took a breath.

It was important to be objective, to challenge assumption. The Wardens in White had told him that he must tread the road between Hope and Despair. Was

that the meaning of the visions?

The Watchers had brought him here to undergo their trials. What were they looking for? Weaknesses. They had said as much. Flaws in his character that would impinge his ability to lead the Chapter. They had doubts and had shared them.

Even so, they had insisted that they had not chosen the visions. It could be a lie, a manipulation intended to distract and dishearten him, but that seemed unlikely. He had no reason to think the Watchers were being false with him. In that case, they were genuine in the assertion that they had not selected the nature of the visions.

He closed his eyes, trying to still his thoughts. If by act of sheer will he could come upon the answer, he was determined to do so.

Pride. Was it pride talking? Was it pride that made failure so unacceptable? Not just pride, but stubbornness. But it was not wrong to be steadfast in his beliefs and principles. The conflict this caused threw his thoughts into another spin, unable to settle on one matter for some time.

He opened his eyes and started counting the stones. It was a simple technique that Chaplain Analleus had taught him. The mundane, repetitive task was better than any mantra or canticle, and required just the right amount of concentration to clear his thoughts.

It was time to start again with the analysis.

The Watchers had not chosen the visions. Who had? He felt that if he could solve that puzzle he would take a step closer towards passing the trials.

The visions had come from his memories. One was even a memory he could not consciously recollect. The Watchers had certainly been complicit, giving shape to those embedded thoughts. But they had not chosen them. By what criteria had they been selected and by whom?

He mentally retraced his steps, back to an earlier assumption. If the trials were not set to expose the doubts of the Watchers...

'*My* doubts,' he said, standing up. 'They are the lingering threads of my past life. They are the worst parts of me given form, the doubts that have accrued over the centuries.'

He stepped towards the closest Watcher in the Dark.

'I understand. But the answers I gave were not justifications, they were the truth. We all have doubts, and if you are a leader it is not that you have them, but how you deal with them. My doubts are what keep me true to the cause. I question my motives. I examine my deeds. I keep my doubts close for they are

the guard against complacency, the sentry I place to ward away arrogant certainty.'

The Watcher looked up, the bright coals of its eyes met his gaze and dizziness struck the Grand Master. The room started to revolve, faster and faster, until he lost balance and fell.

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

A breeze stirred Azrael. Stronger than a breeze. Cloth lightly touching his face.

He opened his eyes and saw the hem of a robe, dark green. The Grand Master thought it a Watcher in the Dark, but as his senses returned and he looked up, he found himself looking at a tapestry depicting the Angel of Death.

A quick glance around revealed more of the same, twelve in total, hanging by golden ropes from hooks on the plain plastered walls of a chamber a dozen metres across.

There was no sign of the Watchers.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

The question came from every direction, an assault on his hearing. He caught movement in the corner of his eye and spun, but there was nothing to see, only a gently undulating hanging.

'I am a Space Marine. I know no fear. You cannot intimidate me.'

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

He shuddered at the force of the demanding voice. Azrael's hearing buzzed for several seconds after, though he was sure there was no echo despite the spacious dimensions of the chamber.

More movement on the edge of vision. This time he turned more slowly, alert to any change. He saw nothing.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

He was about to give an answer but instinct threw him aside; only a moment later his conscious mind registered the whisper of a blade cutting the air. He turned as he rolled, whipping the *Sword of Secrets* from its scabbard.

Coming to his feet, he confronted empty air, his blade raised to a guard position. A second later, he turned again in anticipation of a fresh attack, slashing

with the sword at throat height.

The meteoric metal crashed against another blade. Azrael stepped back, reeling from the spectral sight before him.

One of the Angels of Death loomed large in the centre of the chamber, its ornately hilted sword gripped in two skeletal hands, a yawning black emptiness beneath the rippling hood of its dark green robe. White wings quivered behind it.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE? it demanded, cutting its sword towards Azrael's midriff.

He parried without thought, turning the blade past his thigh. The counter-attack was equally instinctual, the tip of his blade thrust towards the chest of his adversary. With impossible speed the Angel of Death blocked the attack and whipped its own sword at his shoulder.

Though he parried this latest assault, Azrael gasped as the pain of his recent wounds flared through the muscle of his arm and chest.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

'The Emperor!' Azrael shouted back, stepping aside to avoid an incoming stroke towards his aching chest. 'I serve the Emperor!'

Leaping out of reach, Azrael saw another Angel of Death flow from a second tapestry. It was as if the threads came to life, unravelling and bulging from the canvas, reknitting as a towering apparition.

The Grand Master dived between the two wraith-like figures, cutting his sword through the robe of the one on his right, where knees should have been. The *Sword of Secrets* parted cloth, slicing effortlessly through the thick fabric, but passed on through the robe without meeting resistance.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

The pair of angels spoke in unison, their wings fluttering with agitation as they turned on the Grand Master and assumed identical poses with swords pointed at his face.

'Mankind,' he gasped. 'The Space Marines serve mankind.'

Azrael managed to block one of the swords, but the other struck him in the arm. The long blade left no mortal injury, but at its touch a numbing chill spread along the limb, deadening it between elbow and fingers. He tried to flex his hand, to regain life, backstepping rapidly as a third Angel of Death manifested itself in the chamber.

With the *Sword of Secrets* in one hand, he stayed in motion, jabbing and feinting, using short and quick steps to keep himself out of harm's way, not allowing the three apparitions to surround him.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

‘The Imperium?’ Azrael was tiring quickly despite his superhuman physiology. The slightest graze of a ghostly blade sent a shiver through him, leeching his strength, wearing down his resolve.

The fourth Angel of Death came at him directly from behind. Azrael threw himself at one of the others to avoid being speared in the back, shoulder-charging the spectre with a roar.

Cloth fluttered around him, its touch oddly delicate amidst the fury of battle, and then he slammed into the wall behind, meeting hard stone at full speed. He rebounded and turned, lifted up his weapon in a wild defence to catch the crossguard of a descending blade.

WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

Sword locked with the apparition of the Angel of Death, he stared directly into the fathomless depths beneath its cowl, seeking some light, some indication of what it was. What it wanted of him.

‘The Dark Angels.’ He pushed with all of his strength, dragging his blade free from the entanglement of the ghost sword. ‘I serve the Dark Angels.’

As swiftly as they had manifested, the Angels of Death retreated to their banners, becoming one with the woven cloth in seconds. Panting, Azrael regarded them warily, flexing his fingers as life returned. The pain in his shoulder subsided and his hearts slowed from their frantic thrashing.

Something had changed, and it took a moment until he saw what it was. Where before the embroidered figures had held their blades with the point to the ground, they were now upraised.

The Angels of Death saluted him.

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

Azrael wondered how he had not noticed the door before, between two of the hangings. It was not so much a door, though, but a line of shadow delineating its outline and nothing more. He pushed and felt a little resistance. Putting more weight behind his effort he felt the stones behind the plaster give way. The section of wall receded, leaving a gap just a little taller than him, and just wide enough for him to pass through. It stopped, meeting another wall, to leave an alcove a couple of metres deep.

He stepped into the opening and examined the newly revealed sides and floor, but there was nothing but more smooth, naked plaster.

'This way.'

The unfamiliar voice behind him caused Azrael to spin on the spot, sword at the ready. He had thought he could not be further confounded by the trials of the Watchers, but to come face to face with a copy of himself was a revelation.

The doppelganger was perfect in every way, as far as he could tell. Every small scar and lesion from centuries of war marked his tanned skin. The eyes, the wrinkles at the corners of eyes and mouth, perfect down to the smallest detail.

'I am a projection,' the doppelganger told him. 'A representation. What I look like is inconsequential.'

'Of course,' Azrael said, feeling foolish. He sheathed the *Sword of Secrets* and noticed that his counterpart was unarmed.

'The trials turn my doubts against me, test my loyalty. What are you for?'

'That is curious – I was about to ask you a similar question. What is it to be Supreme Grand Master?'

Azrael stepped back into the chamber. It was as before, the hangings on the plain walls, still with swords raised. He circled his doppelganger. The other

Azrael did not try to keep him in sight, but stared vaguely ahead, like a hololithic avatar.

'Why do you not answer my question?'

'Because it is really *my* question, I think, and I am wondering what I really mean by it. The Watchers have constructed this trial not to test me, but for me to test myself. What is it I actually want to know?'

'Then answer the question. What is it to be the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels?'

'It is to be the Lord of the Tower of Angels, the Master of the Unforgiven. Commander of a thousand Space Marines, spiritual lord to thousands more.'

'Your commands will guide them, shape the course of countless souls. One day the future of the Chapter, of the Imperium, may rest on your decisions. What will you do with that power?'

'Defend the realms of the Emperor, protect mankind and prosecute the alien and impure.'

'Trite nonsense, Azrael. You want to be Supreme Grand Master, not a Novitiate Prefectus. Answer properly. What is your greatest power?'

'To destroy worlds. This fortress-monastery alone can sterilise entire star systems.'

'Short-sighted, beneath one that would assume command of such a potent force. What do you hope to achieve?'

Azrael thought about this for far longer, as unsatisfied with his answers as the doppelganger. It was impossible to obfuscate, to deceive, when arguing with himself.

'I was called, chosen by the others of the Inner Circle. I do not seek this honour – I must bear this burden.'

'Better.'

'The Hunt. The Hunt is the greatest mission of the Dark Angels. While it goes unresolved, while the Fallen remain at large, there is an open wound in our Chapter that spills our lifeblood, distracts us from our true calling.' He took a long breath. 'My greatest power is to unite the Unforgiven, to bring us together in common cause. All that we achieve is as nothing if we cannot expunge the stain upon our honour. And with me is also the power to destroy it all, to unravel the very fabric of the Imperium itself with revelation and truth. Secrets and lies, these are the unfortunate weapons I have in my armoury, as much as boltguns and chainswords.'

'So what will you do as Supreme Grand Master?'

‘End the Hunt. Restore our honour.’

‘End the Hunt? Is it possible?’

‘I must believe so. To think otherwise is to submit to the ultimate ruination of the Chapter. Ten thousand years we have endured. Not under my watch shall we finally succumb to the treacheries of the past.’

While he had been speaking, his attention had wandered, his focus moving away from the doppelganger. It returned now as the figure started to change, becoming a shadow that divided and divided again like a duplicating cell, creating a dozen vague likenesses of itself around him, each somehow merging with the angels depicted on the banners.

As though waking from a dream, Azrael blinked, clearing his vision, his body and mind dull with fatigue.

Twelve members of the Inner Circle waited around him, hoods covering their faces, hands lost within voluminous sleeves. By their tabards he knew them: the Grand Masters of the companies, the heads of the Librarius and Reclusiam.

A gleam of red and gold drew his attention to Ezekiel’s half-hidden face. The Chief Librarian nodded once and lowered to one knee, gaze cast to the ground. Like a ripple expanding outwards from him, the others followed, showing obeisance to their new commander.

‘Praise Azrael,’ they intoned, ‘Supreme Grand Master, Lord of the Dark Angels.’

Ezekiel straightened but did not stand.

‘My lord, you have passed the trials of the catacombs. You are the Supreme Grand Master, Commander of the Unforgiven. Your word is our law. Your oath is our honour. We are your servants, as you are the servant of the Chapter. What would you bid us do?’

Azrael stroked his chin in thought, aware that every word he said carried an unimaginable weight. To speak in haste could bring disaster.

‘I shall think on the matter. Tomorrow you shall have your orders.’

Was that a hint of a smile on the face of Ezekiel, or a trick of the dim light? It came and went in a moment, and there was nothing but the Chief Librarian’s usual stern demeanour when he stood up. The Inner Circle nodded their respects and passed wordlessly from the chamber.

When they had departed, Azrael noticed a small, solitary figure in one corner, almost invisible in the shadows. Red eyes gleamed, brighter for an instant. He felt a sensation of contentment for just a second, and then the figure was gone.

# DATE IDENT: 939939.M41

They sought him out in his private chambers, Ezekiel and Dagonet. The Left Hand and the Right Hand, they had sometimes been called when Naberius had been Supreme Grand Master. Azrael greeted them, offered them wine and chairs and then stood at a window looking out at the stars.

His gaze passed down the expanse of the Tower of Angels, turret after turret, battlements and walls laid down on foundations that predated the Imperium by a millennia or more. All that was left of ancient Caliban, a space-borne scion of a destroyed world.

'Who shall know what sights once lay beyond this window?' he said quietly. 'Fields, perhaps, or the green forests of which the oldest chronicles speak. Mustering grounds where armies that conquered the galaxy for the Emperor were gathered.'

He turned back to them and gestured towards the small door to one side.

'The Supreme Grand Master's library.' He ran a hand along the ornate table, the dark wood smooth beneath his touch. 'The Supreme Grand Master's desk. Now mine. As are the Supreme Grand Master's labours.'

'We stand to bear the burden with you,' said Dagonet, 'as we did for your predecessor. But the choice is yours. Naberius chose us as his Right Hand and Left Hand – you may choose one, both or others as yours.'

'A waste of deliberation,' Azrael replied. 'I can think of no finer officers in the Chapter.'

'Do not be so swift to dismiss alternatives,' said Ezekiel. As always he spoke softly, his voice carrying a weight far beyond its volume. 'We will take no slight if you decide others are more suited to your temperament. Sammael, for instance, is a bold and decisive leader. The lower ranks glory in his

achievements and daring. He would make a fine champion.'

'Or Sheol,' suggested Dagonet. He twirled his goblet between his fingers, the dark red wine within threatening to spill over the rim but never quite doing so. 'Like yourself, he once considered joining the Reclusiam. A warrior of particular intelligence and heart.'

'I would think you do not enjoy the position,' Azrael said with a short laugh. 'You seem eager to name your replacements.'

Neither of them shared his humour. They exchanged a look and it was Dagonet that spoke.

'Your appointment comes with twofold duties, Azrael. You are the commander-in-chief, Chapter Master of the Dark Angels. You have the experience and skill to command fearlessly and competently.' The Master of Sanctity shrugged. 'But name any man amongst the Inner Circle and that would be true. One does not become a senior officer without merit. Your tenure, whether long or short, shall not lack for military achievements.'

'Your praise overwhelms me, Brother-Chaplain.'

'It is the second duty, the Hunt, which will define you,' Dagonet continued. 'I am the custodian of the Chapter's spirit, Ezekiel the guardian of its mysteries. You must be master of both, and through your leadership of the Inner Circle your accomplishments and legacy will be defined. Accomplishments that few will ever acknowledge and fewer still will celebrate.'

'To be the Right Hand and the Left Hand is to hold power at the deliberations of the Inner Circle,' Ezekiel continued. 'You must be assured that whomever holds such titles is worthy of the trust and authority that comes with them. Do not be persuaded by Naberius' decision – you must make your own, fully and freely.'

'And I have,' Azrael replied, his tone sharper than he intended. He sat behind the desk, gaining himself a little time to regain his composure. 'I can think of no better candidates and I refuse to expend further effort for no gain. If my ascension is to mean anything it is to signal a fresh desire for action, for impetus, not inertia.'

'As you wish,' said Dagonet, standing. Ezekiel rose also but remained silent.

'Brother-Chaplain, we shall speak at the council,' said Azrael, by way of dismissal. 'Ezekiel, remain with me a while longer.'

When Dagonet had departed, Azrael sat with his elbows on the desk, chin rested on his fists, looking at the Chief of Librarians. He met the unwavering stare of Ezekiel's mismatched eyes, determined not to avert his gaze despite his

unease at their scrutiny.

'What do you know of my examination by the Watchers in the Dark?'

'Only that at which I was present,' Ezekiel replied. 'Naberius tried to tell me of his experiences but I refused to listen. I would advise the same to you. What passes between you and the Watchers, then and now and in the future, is for you alone.'

'I fear their trial has placed more doubts in me than it has settled. I am reminded of my many mistakes and defeats.'

'Give me a leader that has never made a mistake and I will show you a man that never had to learn a hard lesson. We laud victory. We must value the forge of defeat equally.'

Azrael accepted this with a nod, heartened by the thought. He continued to watch Ezekiel, who seemed unmoved by his new commander's scrutiny.

'Who are you?' Azrael eventually asked.

'A question that masks another, brother-commander,' replied the Librarian. 'What do wish to know about me?'

'I know your duties, Ezekiel, and the marks of honour next to your name. I can look up your battle history, the story of your novitiatehood. I even know your role within the darker quest we undertake, and your dealings with the Fallen.' Azrael sat back. 'These are the things you have done, the duties you perform. Tell me, *who* are you? What are you to me?'

'You cannot define the indefinable,' the Librarian said slowly. He stepped past Azrael and waved towards the starfield beyond the window. 'What is a star? A pinprick of light. A monster capable of devouring worlds. A lifegiver. A collection of volatile atoms. A beacon.'

'Did you refuse to give Naberius straight answers as well?' growled Azrael.

'I am what you need me to be, Supreme Grand Master.' Ezekiel laid a hand on the desk in front of Azrael, fingers splayed. 'I am your confidante, if you wish. Your advisor, should you require it. A judge, if that is what you desire. Your conscience, if you need me to be so. Your enforcer, your avenger, your guide and your critic. Any and all of these things I shall be.'

'You mean "can be", surely?'

Ezekiel straightened and set his inhuman stare upon Azrael, unblinking and intense. He seemed to swell in size while the shadows in the chamber darkened, making the gold flecks of his eye brighter, and the red gleam of the false lens in the other seem all the closer.

'I do not choose the roles, and neither do you, Lord of the Rock. I will simply

be what is required, shaped by your choices, moulded by your acts.'

The Lord of the Librarius turned away and the room returned to its normal state.

'You must understand a simple fact, Azrael,' Ezekiel told him, not turning around. 'I am more powerful than you. My abilities and training have honed me into a creature as far above a Space Marine as you are above a normal man. If I desired it, I could slay you out of hand. I need not even raise my sword to do so.'

Azrael pushed to his feet, an angry retort swelling inside, but it was halted as Ezekiel turned around, his expression not one of belligerence but sorrow.

'I do not say these things to threaten you, Azrael, because I do not need to. Despite your conditioning, against all the defences prepared in your mind against the likes of me, I could unpick your thoughts as a thief at a lock. More than that, I could reassemble them as I desire, to make a puppet of you to my whim.'

The Librarian sighed, head bowed, a moment of very human frailty Azrael had never seen in Ezekiel before.

'You think your loyalty was tested? You think that your character, your strength of purpose was pushed by your induction into the Chapter, by your trials with the Watchers in the Dark? Think on what examinations my kind undergo, what judgements are arranged against us for the simple fact of a quirk of nature? Forget my suitability to become a Space Marine. When first I was found, my life and soul as a human hung in the balance.'

His face grew stern again, eye narrowed.

'I am a psyker. A witch. A doomsayer. A necromancer. I dwell in a place between worlds, not entirely of one or the other. I walk paths no other man can see. I open doors to places where the greatest evils dwell. I confront temptations that would crush the will of lesser folk.'

Azrael said nothing, taken aback by the usually taciturn Librarian's outburst.

'You ask what I am to you? You demand that I explain myself to you, Supreme Grand Master?' Ezekiel returned that inhuman stare to his lord. 'I am nothing, for if not, I would be everything!'

Stunned, Azrael made no intervention when the Chief Librarian turned away. With a flick of a hand Ezekiel opened the door and strode out, his talisman and charms clattering. Azrael blinked as the door slammed shut.

For several minutes he looked at the door, trying to absorb what had happened. The only firm conclusion he could draw from the entire episode was that he would have to phrase his questions more precisely in future.

# DATE IDENT: 941939.M41

*The tower stands on a hill, broken, its empty windows a dead stare, battlements tumbled from within.*

*Lightning flashes. There is a face in the lowest window; frail fingers clasp at the metal bars. The night air is torn by a plaintive howl, not of any animal, but the unleashed despair of a man.*

*The twilight that breaks across the sky is no dawn, it is the glow of devouring flames. From the ground itself rises the fire and in the crackle of its burning washes a maniac's cackle. The licks of fire that paw at the ruin are questing fingers seeking entry. The inferno surrounds the tower, its ruddy light caught on the age-worn stones.*

*From the tower the man shrieks and moans, his pain a piercing felt keener than any dagger wound. The flames consume him, releasing an agony that is overwhelming, all-devouring and eternal. The burning is not the burning of another, but of the dreaming observer.*

*He that was without the tower is now within and only he can break himself free.*

Azrael rose from his sleep-like state, the dream an itch at the back of his mind. He lay on the hard slab of his cot for several minutes, trying to catch the last images but they fluttered from his thoughts like the embers of a dying fire on a breeze. They were replaced by a memory of small hooded figures with ruby eyes.

He sat up, scanning the cell for interlopers, but he was alone, the door bolted. He recalled the words of Ezekiel, his promise of non-interference, and had to trust that the psyker was true to his commander.

The Chapter Master took the ewer of water from the nightstand beside the cot and drank heavily, ignoring the plain metal cup beside it. The cold liquid

refreshed his body even if it felt as though a dark fog continued to permeate his thoughts.

There was something he had to do, he was certain of it, but could not recall the specific task. Instead, he walked over to the vox-caster on the desk. He pressed the runes to connect to the Librarium. After a delay of several seconds the link crackled into activity.

'This is Supreme Grand Master Azrael.' The extra word in his title came surprisingly naturally. 'Inform the Chief Librarian and the Master of Astropaths that they are to broadcast an invitation to our Successor Chapters to attend at the Tower of Angels for a grand council. The sons of the Lion will convene in full at Rhamiel.'

The Hall of Decemial echoed with the tread of the company masters and other officers of command rank. Their robes and hoods were gone; they came garbed in their war-plate, as warriors of the Dark Angels, not members of the Inner Circle. The audience chamber was nearly a hundred metres long, situated above one of the great gates of the fortress once known as the Angelicasta.

Banners and rolls of honour from ten thousand years of war adorned the walls, overhanging each other in places, so great was their number. The heraldry of a thousand captains surrounded the proceedings; the standards of sergeants and squads otherwise long forgotten by history formed the backdrop of Azrael's first council as Supreme Grand Master.

At one end of the hall was a low stage set with a throne, its back higher than the tallest Space Marine, made of intricately carved obsidian and ebony. This chair dominated the room despite the vastness of the hall. Its size warranted attention but its presence was far greater, for this was the Throne of the Lion and the mark of the Primarch lay upon the wood and stone. Every Space Marine that entered looked upon the chair and gave a quick bow, as though Lion El'Jonson were still sitting upon its dark frame.

A little way ahead and to the right of the forbidding throne was set another chair, itself a sizeable piece of furniture that would have graced any monarch's hall, but dwarfed and made plain by its companion. Azrael stood before the Regent's Seat, fully armoured, the *Sword of Secrets* laid upon the broad oval table placed in front of the thrones for the council's deliberations.

The table was nearly thirty metres long and ten wide, its surface once heavily lacquered in red but now a dark brown, almost black with centuries of wear and patina. At the edges the wood was split and knocked from ten millennia of fists

pounded in support of a speech, of knives belligerently plunged into the timbers and fingertips jabbed in emphasis.

Gold leaf marked a winged sword at its centre, and about the icon were arranged six other symbols: a key and a gate; an hourglass and a flame; and a sword and a gauntlet, their original meanings now lost to antiquity.

This was the public face of the Chapter command, the known seats of the ruling council, distinct from the secret, hidden chambers of the Inner Circle. The galleries and hall were open to all to witness the deliberations and oaths of their leaders, though few were the times in ten thousand years that any but a handful of Dark Angels had been spared of battle duty to observe such meetings, save for on those rare occasions decreed by the Supreme Grand Master that recalled the entirety of the Chapter during momentous events.

Such was not this day. The Dark Angels were at war; companies still engaged across Rhamiel to contain the uprising and guard against the threat of the Night Lords and other traitors. To mark his ascendancy, Azrael had permitted his commanders half a day of reflection and debate. The Supreme Grand Master was absolute authority incarnate within the Rock, but he was not a tyrant.

A few warriors whose injuries prevented them returning to the battlefield watched with interest, alongside several score of Neophytes and Scouts for whom the occasion was a first glimpse of such Chapter spectacle, and also a much-desired break from the hard routine of training and studies. Some tried to maintain the solemnity they thought appropriate of such occasions, others chattered excitedly, exchanging tales and rumours of each hero of the Chapter that entered the grand audience chamber.

Opposite the thrones were immense double doors, made of wood carved with two identical figures of the Angel of Death. Azrael could not help but remember his trial when he looked at them, hiding a shudder of discomfort at the recollection.

By the great doors stood two young Neophytes, each no more than sixteen Terran years of age, dressed in tabards and cloaks of deep green. One had a long clarion in his hands and let forth a pealing note as each Chapter dignitary entered. As the last echoes resounded around the Hall of Decemial, the other youth called out the name and titles of the council member.

‘Captain Ballan of the Seventh, Lord of the Unbowed, Master of the Watchers!’

With a wheeze and hiss of hydraulics from his artificial spine and left arm, Ballan paced down the hall to his position next to Araphil of the Sixth.

‘Master Chaplain Denathiel, Bearer of the Ebon Scrolls!’

The senior Chaplain made his way to the opposite side of the table to sit next to Asmodai, the recently promoted Master of Repentance. Azrael could not help but notice that the two of them did not exchange so much as a glance. Dagonet was already seated, either oblivious to this antipathy or choosing not to engage with it in the public forum of the council hall.

'Captain Calogrant of the Eighth, Lord of the Wrathful, Master of Condemnation!'

Calogrant was short, comparatively, heavy-jowled and thick-browed. His bald scalp caught the light of the hundreds of lumens that lit the chamber. His dark eyes fixed on Azrael and did not leave the Supreme Grand Master even when seated at the table.

'Captain Xerophus of the Ninth, Lord of the Remorseless, Master of Relics!'

And on they came, Saphamedes of the Tenth, and Epistolary Dalgar, and another Chaplain of the Reclusiam, Sapphon, until all thirty members of the Chapter Council had been assembled bar one.

Last appeared a warrior in Terminator armour, newly painted with fresh heraldry. He held before him the *Sword of Silence*, kin-sword to Azrael's own Heavenfall Blade, offered up with hilt pointed towards the Supreme Grand Master.

The heralds fell silent at this point. The assembled officers stood, all eyes turned to the newcomer. With hisses and clatters of gear they unsheathed swords and freed their axes, hammers and maces from their slings. Thirty-eight weapons raised in challenge, thirty-eight relics of the Chapter whose histories were better known even than their bearers, offered in defiance of the stranger amongst their ranks.

Azrael then stood, picked up the *Sword of Secrets* and sheathed it at his hip, drawing his cloak over it, hiding the weapon.

'My first appointment – Lanval of the First, Lord of the Deathwing, Grand Master of the Knights of Caliban.'

'I have been bidden here by my lord,' the Terminator declared, his voice carrying easily to the furthest reaches. He drew the *Sword of Silence* and raised the glittering blade towards Azrael and then to the others. 'I have come to answer my duty. Do any here deny me?'

For several seconds silence descended. Lanval faced down his challengers, expression stern, eyes moving from one Master of the Chapter to the next.

'Praise Lanval!' Zadakiel of the Fifth was the first to lift up his sword. 'Grand Master!'

‘Praise Lanval!’ added Sammael, raising the *Raven Sword* in salute to his new brother-in-command. ‘Grand Master!’

A chorus of ritual assents and cheers swelled up from the company of officers, welcoming Lanval into the council. All but one had raised their weapons in acknowledgement of Azrael’s choice and their attention turned to the last.

Ezekiel stood with the point of *Traitor’s Bane* levelled at the candidate – the edges of the force sword glinted with psychic power, matching the golden motes that dazzled in the Chief Librarian’s remaining eye. For several seconds more the Librarian remained motionless. Azrael held his breath. It was Ezekiel’s right, as any council member, to oppose the appointment, but such a right had not been exercised for many centuries.

‘Praise Lanval.’ The Chief Librarian’s hoarse whisper seemed louder than the shouts of the others combined. *Traitor’s Bane* lifted in acceptance. ‘Grand Master.’

Lanval acknowledged the salutes with his own blade and then sheathed his weapon before striding to his place at the grand table, to the gap between Azrael and Sammael. He received more informal congratulations and support on the way, and accepted the praises of his companions with dignified nods.

All present paid honour to Azrael once more before settling their weapons again. Only Azrael remained with his sword drawn. He looked at each of his councillors in turn.

‘The accession of a new Supreme Grand Master is never a cause for celebration, for in the elevation of one is counted the fall of another. I come before you to swear that I will discharge the duties of Chapter Master to the best of my skill. Formal declarations of command transfer have been broadcast for the attention of the Adeptus Terra. So it is that I assume without hindrance, by the traditions of our Chapter and the requirements of Imperial Law, leadership of the Dark Angels Chapter of the Emperor’s Space Marines.’

Azrael held the *Sword of Secrets* at chest height and gripped the blade in his other hand, drawing blood from his palm. He let his life fluid run down the runnel of the blade and offered up his wounded hand to his companions.

‘I swear my first oath here. We shall avenge ourselves against the rebels and Night Lords that robbed us of Naberius and continue to slight our honour with their resistance. Rhamiel is cursed. We shall deliver it.’

# PART THREE

# DATE IDENT: 237744.M41

*He shivers and clasps the rough woven tunic tighter. He knows he should not feel the cold. The draughty corridor is nothing compared to the bitter winds and snow of his home. But it is not the temperature alone that chills him. The stones leech the warmth from the air, from his skin, as though feeding on it, sustained over an age by the life of mortals.*

*The others feel it too and press close together for comfort.*

*'In line,' growls the towering giant in the skull-faced mask. His robe is black, stitched with a silver hourglass on the left side of his chest. His hood covers his head, and all that identifies him are the dark grey eyes behind the eyeholes of the skull. 'In step.'*

*In one hand he carries a rod tipped with the symbol of the winged sword – the icon of the Dark Angels, the young aspirant has been taught. The master chides and goads with it but never strikes. His presence alone, his gruff remonstrations are enough to have the half a dozen aspirants falling into single file again.*

*They walk, leather slippers following the track down the corridors worn smooth by unknown previous generations, until it leads them to a square chamber with eight archways. Through each they see more rooms, and within the rooms rows of lecterns and shelves. Youths from their own age up to those on the verge of adulthood work at the lecterns, buzzing electroquills in hand.*

*'You, in there.'*

*It takes him a moment to realise he is being addressed. He sees that the master is pointing to the closest arch. The rest are sent to different chambers.*

*None of the inhabitants look up as he enters. He loiters at the threshold until an ageing serf dressed in black overalls and a dark green shirt notices him and beckons him closer.*

*At the serf's direction he stands at an empty lectern. There is blank parchment upon it and beside is a thick-bound tome open to a colourful page depicting a monstrous green humanoid with lines of small symbols all around it.*

*'Your past ends here.' He looks up in shock as the master looms over him. 'Nothing that came before exists in this place. Your home, your parents, your friends. You are dead to them and they to you. Your name is gone, left behind on that planet. The Rock is now your whole world.'*

*The master draws a slab of metal from the folds of his robe and a shining plate springs into life on its surface. The youth stares in fear at the sorcery on display in this place – lights that need no flame and other dark marvels.*

*'You shall be...' The master's finger flicks the plate a few times. 'Azrael. Your name is Azrael now.'*

*'Az-ray-ul.'*

*'Azrael. Yes.' The master puts away his magical slate and pushes back his skull mask to reveal a broad face, the left side heavily scarred with a burn, the skin thick and leathery. The look in his eyes is stern but not cruel. 'Azrael, you are to become a Space Marine of the Dark Angels Chapter. The tests you have undergone, the trials we submitted you to, are just the beginning. Only the bravest, fiercest, fastest and most loyal warriors become battle-brothers of the Chapter. If you do, if you are amongst the one-in-a-hundred novitiates that survive and prove your worth, you are committed to a lifetime of service to the Emperor and unending battle.'*

*These statements are made clearly, slowly, without accusation or softening. They are simply facts laid before him.*

*He nods his understanding, though he grasps only the most basic concept of what has happened.*

*'I will...' he looks around the room. 'I will learn here? To be a Dark Angel?'*

*The master nods and gestures to one of the nearby youths.*

*'Daethus, this is Azrael. Fetch the Roll of Honour.'*

*The boy nods and dashes off through another doorway. He returns quickly with a scroll and offers it to the master. The Space Marine declines it with a shake of his head and points at the other novitiate.*

*'These are the deeds of all that came before who bore the name of Azrael. Daethus, read out the Roll of Honour.' The master picks up the pen beside the lectern and presses it into Azrael's hand. 'You will make a new copy, on here.'*

*Azrael looks at the blank sheet and at the electroquill. He puts the pen down on the lectern and looks at the master with tearful eyes, believing he has already*

*failed.*

*‘I cannot... I cannot make the symbols.’*

*‘Writing,’ Daethus tells him. ‘It is called writing.’*

*‘I cannot make the writing, master.’*

*The master pulls down his mask and his voice becomes a harsh growl again.*

‘*Of course not. Your ignorance is your virtue. But we will unmake you, and with the flesh and bone and spirit that is left craft something far greater. Say not that you cannot read nor write. There is nothing a Dark Angel cannot strive towards. Say instead that you cannot read and write* yet*.’*

*Azrael picks up his stylus.*

# DATE IDENT: 032940.M41

Vengeance. To most, vengeance is little different from justice. To them vengeance is a balancing, a restitution against those that have wronged. A *proportionate* act. To the Dark Angels vengeance was a master to be obeyed, a demand, not to right wrongs or address slights, but to eradicate all threat and knowledge of the injury.

To the Dark Angels vengeance was a blade whetted by the bodies of their enemies for ten thousand years, and they were both precise and relentless in their pursuit of it.

The purging of Rhamiel began with the extermination of the Iron Stalagmite. While Naberius had been hobbled by the suspicion that the Fallen were involved in the rebellion of Rhamiel, Azrael no longer harboured such illusions. If they had been present, they were long gone. All that remained was to excise the cancer they had nurtured in the flesh of the Imperium.

At the command of the Supreme Grand Master, the Rock moved into low orbit above the enemy stronghold. Naberius' previous assault had destroyed all but the most basic anti-orbital weapons and these were easily dealt with by pinpoint strikes from Dark Angels aircraft and bombardment from their escort vessels.

Ancient power grids blazed into life at the intervention of the Master of the Forges. Cybernetically nestled within the framework of the Rock itself, the lord of the Techmarines redirected the output of plasma reactors and poured forth his ire into the batteries of cannons that bristled upon the walls of the Tower of Angels. Serf teams laboured in the depths to bring forth the huge macro cannon shells from the magazines and toiled with the massive torpedoes that would sow Azrael's wrath upon the surface of Rhamiel.

Maintaining position just at the edge of practical orbit, the Rock appeared as a

blot against the noon sun, the shadow enough to cause a chill to pass over the defenders that manned the walls of Rhamiel's greatest stronghold. Rebel and heretek looked up in awe as it seemed an early twilight settled upon them.

Through the miracle of scanner datafeeds from circling aircraft and vox-net communications, from atop a stepped dais at the centre of the strategium the Supreme Grand Master viewed the scene on the world kilometres below. On screens five metres high he observed the unfolding spectacle from the centre of the Rock's command spire.

The command deck situated halfway up the main tower was an octagonal hall, its high ceiling held up by broad columns. Blue light spilled down from huge lanterns mounted in the high vaults, merging with the gleam of monitors and vid-screens from a hundred workstations arranged about the hall's main deck and on galleries and mezzanines above. Though there was a company of attendants and Space Marines alert to the orders of their Supreme Grand Master, the bulk of operations were handled directly by the Master of the Forge. It was to him that Azrael issued his command.

'Burn it,' he said simply.

The fire command blared out through the gun turrets and cannon batteries of the fortress-monastery and the Techmarines of the Dark Angels responded. Laser fire speared down through the skies and plasma bombs rained.

From the ground it was as though the heavens wept fire. Beams of light pierced the walls while the fury of artificial stars fell upon the citadel. In their wake screamed shells built to break the spines of starships and warheads that exploded with vortices of flaring energy that swallowed everything they touched.

Into the devastation swept a flight of Dark Talon fighters, their rift cannons tearing punctures through the walls of reality to rip asunder the foundations of towers, to crack open bunkers and magazines.

Black-painted Land Speeders of the Ravenwing swept and soared through the smoke and flames of the Iron Stalagmite's death, assault cannons and heavy bolters slashing through any that had survived the onslaught from the heavens. Like vultures preying upon a dying behemoth, the gunships of the Dark Angels circled the summit of the fractured mountain. The thunder of battlecannons and the streaks of blacksword missiles heralded the end for scores of hereteks fleeing the ruination of their city.

Azrael watched the unfolding termination without comment or emotion. It would be too easy to take satisfaction from the event, to see the destruction of the Iron Stalagmite as the end of one road and the start of the other. To take joy

from that moment would be an invitation to repetition, to seek destruction for its own sake.

He knew there were some amongst his fellow Chapter Masters who might glory in the crushing power unleashed against the enemies of the Emperor. There were likely some even amongst his predecessors as Lords of the Rock. Not for Azrael the aggrandisement of annihilation. The destruction was not a victory; it was a condemnation of the failure of Naberius.

Azrael did not see an enemy stronghold laid to ruin, he saw a citadel of the Emperor lost. He would bring fire and death to Rhamiel and would wage the terrible war required to expunge the taint in the world's soul. Thousands had already died. Many thousands more were still to be slain. Millions perhaps, depending upon the depth of heresy and the scale of resistance.

As he watched a tower collapse under the combined pummelling of two Thunderhawk gunships, Azrael reminded himself that this might have been avoided. Naberius had hoped for a clean strike, a decapitation of the rebel movement that would allow the rest to be vanquished without resort to full-scale intervention.

It was a laudable aim, and spoke of Naberius' moral quality more than his strategic acumen. The avoidance of collateral deaths was desirable but not of paramount importance. The Imperium had countless numbers; even the loss of billions barely registered in the calculations of the Adeptus Terra. The practicalities of such losses were inconsequential.

But Azrael knew why Naberius had delayed the grand stroke, and hoped to win by capitulation what Azrael was now forced to extract with decimation. The power of the Rock and of the Dark Angels that were its far-flung children, might be intoxicating to a lesser commander. Even as Grand Master of the Deathwing, leader of one of the most destructively elite companies in the Imperium, Azrael had known but a fraction of the power that he now wielded.

And the temptation to unleash that power, the lure to put right all wrongs with its overwhelming force already nagged at Azrael's thoughts. Already he was re-examining his decision to crush Rhamiel, to bring the full force of the Dark Angels Chapter to bear against the rebel world.

Vengeance. The shade of Naberius demanded it. The honour of the Chapter was salvaged by it. Duty to the Emperor, the example to others, allowed no alternative.

For all that, Azrael knew there was another possibility, another more personal reason for the extremity of his reaction.

The site of Naberius' death was being eradicated, torn down to its decayed roots, but that did not absolve Azrael of what he had done. None had mentioned it, but the fact remained that Naberius had been alive when they had found him. Though sustained by the machines of the hereteks, the Supreme Grand Master had been alive and it had been Azrael's act that had ended his predecessor's existence.

'Supreme Grand Master?'

The questioning tone broke through his thoughts, and Azrael realised the attendant had addressed him twice before to gain his attention.

'Yes?'

'Grand Master Sammael requests permission to lead investigatory teams into the ruins.'

Azrael knew immediately the subtext to the Ravenwing commander's request – to hunt for any Fallen that may have been in the citadel. That had been Naberius' fear, that destruction alone would not root out the traitor Dark Angels he thought responsible.

'Declined,' Azrael replied. 'The scourging will continue at distance. Ravenwing squadrons to remain enforcing the perimeter.'

The attendant nodded and returned to the vox desk. The sound of boots on the deck announced the arrival of another Space Marine behind Azrael.

'You keep the leash tight on Sammael, my lord,' said Ezekiel, stepping up beside Azrael.

The Supreme Grand Master said nothing immediately, but watched the unfolding controlled cataclysm on the many displays arrayed about the command deck. He saw both from a great distance and at first hand the force he had unleashed. Orbital scans highlighted the plasma residue and cyclotronic scarring as clinical lines of data. Conversely, the cockpit feed of a Ravenwing gunner brought stark contrast – the mute, screaming face of a silver-scaled heretek ripped asunder by heavy bolter rounds, his arm and leg missing as he flailed across bloodstained rubble.

Azrael looked directly at Ezekiel.

'There is nothing to be found in the ashes of the Iron Stalagmite. The manner of the Night Lords' arrival during our assault stands testament to a technology, or other power, capable of spiriting them through an active force field. I do not expect them, or any others of rank, to have remained long in the stronghold once the bombardment started. There is no reward in a quest for something that does not exist.'

Ezekiel's eye narrowed at this answer, sensing Azrael spoke of something deeper than this particular mission.

'On occasion we do not know the true nature of the quest until we undertake it,' the Librarian replied. 'The goal is often simply enlightenment.'

'Wisdom without action is empty,' Azrael replied. 'The Iron Stalagmite is no more. One by one we shall find the rebels' dark holes and bring the light of battle to shine upon them. Though we may do so for the memory of Naberius, let us not forget that a world of the Emperor has been taken from His kingdom.'

'There are others that can restore it to His Imperial grace,' Ezekiel replied.

'The Astra Militarum? By the time they arrive, a year hence perhaps, the whole world will be damned. We have a chance here to thwart the growth of heresy before it takes deeper root. Whatever misgivings we may have about coming here, what untruths lured Naberius to his doom, we should not forget that we have been granted an opportunity.'

Ezekiel said nothing, leaving Azrael to wonder if his silence was acquiescence or accusation. It was hard to believe the Master of the Librarius' odd behaviour towards his new commander was related to the outburst in Azrael's study. That suggested a pettiness beneath even a newly promoted Scout, never mind a Master of the Chapter. Azrael knew there was no point in asking directly. Ezekiel seemed intent on trying to teach the Supreme Grand Master a lesson, and like the Watchers during Azrael's trial was equally determined to force him to discover the nature of the lesson himself.

'Strategic control, hierarchal report,' he called, turning away from Ezekiel. 'What is our next target based on population density and Adeptus Mechanicus presence?'

'The city of Ixxios, Lord Azrael,' came the reply. 'Widespread forge facilities and Adeptus Mechanicus work force.'

'Good. Have the *Intolerant* and escorts move to attack position and notify Master Belial. We will leave no haven for the hereteks. We shall scourge Rhamiel until the populace will grant them no succour.'

Azrael watched for a few seconds while the order was relayed. With the next step along the path resolved, he turned to address Ezekiel. The Chief of Librarians had departed, leaving Azrael with an uncomfortable number of questions.

# DATE IDENT: 113940.M41#0734

‘Do you think they’re ready for a fight?’ asked Sammael.

Smoke from burning cities cast a twilight pall across the ashen waste that had been the heartland of Rhamiel’s northern hemisphere agrizone. To the north west the flanks of shallow mountains were awash with promethium flame from three days of relentless firebombing. When Azrael had promised to burn the rebellion from the face of Rhamiel he had not been using metaphor.

The Dark Angels had been relentless and merciless in their prosecution of the scouring. In areas identified as harbouring large rebel forces, the Ravenwing and battle companies drove millions from their homes, before the gunships and star vessels of the Chapter razed the cities and levelled farmlands and sprawling manufactoria.

After such devastation of the third city, Daephios, a counter-rebellion had begun. Thousands of loyal defence personnel and armed Imperial citizens now roamed the streets to attack any they believed to have rebel sympathies, driving them from their urban shelter and away from the bulk of the population. There would be no more succour, no sanctuary for those that defied the Emperor.

The wilderness had provided little relief for the hereteks and renegade planetary defence force. Separated from the general populace they had been made easy prey for orbital bombardment and targeted aerial assaults.

The Dark Angels offered no relent against their enemies. The Ravenwing sought them out from the ice-harvest fields of the southern pole to the equatorial geothermal stations, and brought down the ire of a dozen starships on those they found.

The Deathwing broke open the plasma cores of forge-cities and armoured columns speared into the red deserts of the eastern hinterlands, engaging massed

enemy tank squadrons across treacherous rivers and ever-shifting dunes of carmine sand.

Across Adeptus Mechanicus forgeworks over a thousand-island tropical archipelago the battle companies of the Rock drove out the hereteks and their insane machines. They warred across five thousand bridges, tunnels and skyways to raze the last existence of the traitor cult from Rhamiel.

Now the last rebel defence forces issued forth from the northern mountains, to challenge the Dark Angels to open battle, the last of the hereteks among their ranks. The smoke of their exhausts adding to the fume of the burning refineries to the east, long columns of tanks previously sheltered from the wrath of the Space Marines wound down the mountain highways, escorted by three immense Knight walkers roused from dormancy by the renegade Adeptus Mechanicus. Tri-rotored attack craft swept above, while the sky was scarred with the contrails of interceptor jets. Soldiers numbering in the thousands advanced on foot and in armoured transports, beneath black banners and skull-topped standards. Everywhere the winged skull of the Night Lords could be seen, replacing the Imperial aquila and Machine-God's sigil in devotion, though of the traitor legionaries themselves there was yet no sign.

Broken outcrops of glassified rock and plasma craters marked the battle zone amongst still-burning lakes of promethium and fields of unexploded ordnance. An orbit-dropped aegis line delineated the killzones, a solid row of prefabricated armoured ferrocrete punctuated by squat bunkers every three hundred metres. Several kilometres of livewire – heat-seeking razorwire – had been laid upon the banks of the Scalsis River to guard against aquatic intrusion on the Dark Angels' western flank. Here Land Speeders had already duelled with patrol boats and turreted hovercraft issuing from armoury depots dug beneath the mountains.

The strength of the Chapter was arrayed against the oncoming army, nearly a thousand battle-brothers from across the ten companies. Scout squads had deployed in the charred foothills to waylay and ambush where possible, and to monitor and report on the numbers and strength of the host issuing forth from the valleys.

Devastators manned the Aquila strongpoints and Firestorm redoubts, mixed with Tactical Squads equally capable of defensive and offensive action; in turn a dozen Dreadnoughts bolstered the line where the terrain was dense and fighting would be at its closest. Vengeance weapon batteries and Deathstorm drop pods had been scattered like seeds over the razed ground a kilometre ahead of the main line.

Assault Squads and the Deathwing Terminators waited half a kilometre behind, a fist pulled back ready to land a decisive blow or counter-attack an enemy success. Land Raiders and Rhinos waited to carry forth these reserves while Predators, Vindicators and Whirlwinds of various marks and armament readied their heavy weapons to counter any armoured thrust.

Seething shadows moved back and forth across the newly blasted wastelands, the concealing auras of Ravenwing Darkshrouds. Within the umbra of ancient technologies, the bike squadrons and attack bikes of Ravenwing roamed, ready to intercept outriders of the enemy moving ahead of the main force in Sentinel walkers, and to counter mounted patrols and stalking automatons conjured by the wild technologies of the hereteks.

At the centre of the line rose the main bastion of the Dark Angels fortifications. The walls of the compact fortress rose five metres from the plain, manned by honoured squads from the Third and Seventh Companies. Another twenty metres high stretched the central tower from the summit of which Azrael and his highest-ranking advisors held their final council before battle commenced. Brother Agathor stood bearing the Standard of Fortitude, the fragment recovered from the hereteks now incorporated into a new tapestry faithfully recreating the original design by the labour of the Chapter's aspirants.

'This is a fight they shall regret,' Lanval said.

'Which begs a question,' said Ballan, Master of the Seventh Company. 'What do they hope to gain? Either a fool or a genius leads them against Space Marines, fortified and prepared.'

'That they come is glad tidings enough for me,' said Sammael. He started towards his Land Speeder, the *Sableclaw*, which hovered beside the wall of the tower roof. The Grand Master of the Ravenwing stepped into the waiting seat and looked back at the others. 'The battle is almost upon us and I must be with my company. I may let some of the rebels reach the line for you to make practice of your bolters – I am feeling charitable today!'

He drew the *Raven Sword* in one hand and took up the controls with the other. With a salute, Sammael guided the Land Speeder away, the swirl of his passage soon lost in the haze of smog and distance.

'I had best join my men also,' said Lanval. He gestured towards the Land Raider Crusader waiting behind the tower. 'If you want to end this swiftly, do not delay the counter-attack, my lord. It will not take long for the rebel scum to break, and I would rather not give them too much of a head start back towards the mountains. Let them hit the wall and then drive them hard from it.'

‘I will remember that, brother-captain,’ said Azrael.

The other company masters left with Lanval, so that it was only Azrael, Ezekiel and Dagonet who remained atop the citadel.

‘Ballan speaks truthfully,’ said Azrael. ‘To meet the enemy in open battle so swiftly is beyond all expectation.’

‘Is it possible they care for the people they come from?’ suggested Dagonet. Ezekiel and Azrael both directed harsh glares in his direction. ‘It is right to hate the heretic, but do not misjudge them. They are wayward, but it was not the will to do evil that first took them from the realms of duty and loyalty. Selfishness, often, but sometimes the desire to seek something greater for others. Who knows what lies the Night Lords have planted in their souls? Their new allegiance is carried on every shield and banner.’

‘But their masters do not march with them,’ said Azrael. ‘Either they have committed the sin of treachery twice and abandoned their new lords, or there is some purpose to the renegades sending out their army to confront us openly. They have not begun to stretch our resources or test our mettle.’

‘You are quiet, Ezekiel,’ said Dagonet, ‘even for you. Does the Librarium have any guidance for our lord?’

The Chief Librarian turned his unnatural stare out to the battlefield. He rested one hand on the hilt of *Traitor’s Bane* at his hip, the other held in a fist against his chest.

‘The omens do not portend well for this battle,’ he confessed. ‘There is a greater darkness in the shadows.’

‘Should we abandon the fight?’ said Azrael, startled by these words. ‘You said nothing previous to our deliberations.’

‘To chase shadows is to clutch at nothing, Azrael. Echoes of the future might be phantasms of our own creation. It is a warning, not an edict.’

‘Is there further precaution I should have taken, Ezekiel? The army is arrayed and, to my experience, outmatches the foe in quality and disposition. Our brothers are prepared, in good spirit and eager. The enemy are desperate, poorly led. It is not overconfidence to express my satisfaction at this arrangement.’

‘I speak not of the battle laid before us but of a battle we cannot yet see,’ said Ezekiel. ‘The Night Lords, Azrael. Where are the Night Lords?’

‘Hiding, or perhaps they have fled. We have seen that they owe nothing to the creatures they have swayed to their cause. In seeing their cruel works undone they might choose to abandon Rhamiel to escape the just prosecution that follows them.’

‘Be wary,’ Ezekiel said. ‘That is all I can tell you.’

Azrael nodded and smiled.

‘Were you such a nagging mother to Naberius?’

‘No,’ said Ezekiel, showing no humour. ‘Now he is dead.’

‘Quite.’

The Supreme Grand Master descended into the tower with his companions and attended to the strategic station on the upper level. Here a battery of screens and vox-decks compiled datafeeds projected from dozens of inlet-channels throughout the Dark Angels force. Vid-captures from Ravenwing Land Speeders, orbital multi-spectrum scans, Deathwing sensorium readings and coopted vox-records from command tanks and squad sergeants all converged into the banks of cogitators.

Overseeing the mass of gauges, vid-slates, hololiths and vocalisers was Radagal, a senior Techmarine of the Chapter Armoury. The veteran was more machine than man, having been wounded close to death by a rampaging tyranid monstrosity some years before. The behemoth had almost devoured Radagal before Sergeant Belial and his Deathwing had sawed their way into the creature’s gullet and dragged the unfortunate Techmarine free, slaying the alien leviathan in the process. Radagal had lost both legs, his left arm and half of his head, but through the attentions of the apothecaries and his brothers’ technomancy, and no small measure of personal stubbornness, the Techmarine had survived.

Had he been a brother of the fighting companies he would have likely been interred in a Dreadnought sarcophagus to continue his warrior life. As a specialist of the Chapter, his skills in other areas were too valuable, and a unique automobilia had been constructed for him based upon the engineering and cyberorganics that sustained the Master of the Forge in the heart of the Rock’s infrastructure.

He moved on two tracks taken from a rapier mobile laser cannon, his missing arm replaced with a trio of tendril-like appendages that ended in a dataport-spine, tri-digit claw and combat blade. From his bared skull splayed a dozen mind impulse unit cables, three of which snaked to the apparatus of the strategic metriculators, the others connected to attendant half-man servitors slaved to the Techmarine’s brainwaves, who monitored and manipulated the external controls of the databanks and cogitators.

The vox speakers buzzed with reports from the Ravenwing and orbiting ships, detailing the movements of the approaching army. Azrael deciphered the short

snippets of overlapping combat-cant, piecing together a picture of the battle zone as he watched the runes appearing on a two-metre display screen at the centre of one wall.

The enemy tanks had formed an armoured spearhead at the fore, using themselves as a mobile barrier to protect the troop carriers and infantry. Their pace was deliberate, their formations tight. The Knights moved alongside with long strides, their directional ion fields leaving a scatter of red sparks in their wake.

'No mad dash, no manic rush for victory,' remarked Dagonet. 'A calculated attack. Some semblance of leadership remains.'

'They retain some of their Imperial discipline, that can be seen. But whether it is good command or simply the habit of drill we shall only see when the first shots are fired.'

'We shall not have long to wait,' said Radagal. A subscreen flickered into life and a jerky vid-feed crackled across the viewer. Azrael recognised the gliding movement of a Land Speeder. Its flight path took it along the closest hillsides, upon which large-bore cannons were extending stabiliser legs while enormous vat-grown monotask servitors lifted shells from ammunition carriers.

'Can Sammael reach those guns?' asked Dagonet. 'Strike before they can open fire?'

Azrael assessed the plethora of range-demarcation runes and sigils that crowded the main display and shook his head.

'The enemy have one flank anchored on the river, the same as we do. The tanks out-range the Ravenwing by a margin.' Azrael moved to the broad panel and picked up a digi-quill. He drew it over the screen. Bright lines of red appeared in its wake to delineate the possible attack vectors towards the assembling enemy battery. 'By the time they outflank to the east, the enemy can move these infantry into a blocking position. The only other route is directly through the armoured spearhead.'

'The Knights, Azrael,' said Ezekiel, drawing the commander's attention to the giant war machines advancing alongside the tanks. 'They will soon be in range of Sammael's squadrons.'

'Bikes and Land Speeders are no match for bolt cannons and volkite weapons,' said Dagonet.

'Agreed,' said Azrael. 'Radagal, signal Sammael to conduct a fighting withdrawal to the east. The Ravenwing must endeavour to engage their light elements but stay away from the Knights and heavy armour. When the attack is

broken they will be at the forefront of the pursuit.'

Radagal complied without comment, while Azrael continued to examine the unfolding scene. He moved his attention to the orbital assets at his disposal. A Dark Angels battle-barge was currently on station to provide support, its huge cannons at the ready.

'Have the *Angel of Redemption* commence bombardment of the enemy artillery.'

A nod of acknowledgement from Radagal.

The renegade tanks came on, the rumble of their tracks and the growl of their engines audible even without the pick-up and vox-feeds. The outermost perimeter of defence posts came online, their machine brains detecting the approaching armoured vehicles. Stabs of white lascannon beams cut through the smog while rocket pods rippled with the fire of multiple launches. In reply battlecannons boomed in the murk and autocannons barked their retorts.

An engine exploded, a muted blossom of orange in the gloom. Armour sparked and flared from other shots. Shell impacts from the return fusillade ripped up the already tortured ground around the dropped emplacements and tore at their armoured walls. Ion shield crackling, a towering Knight pressed forwards; its heavy cannons raked fire along the defence line to obliterate several outposts with a single devastating salvo.

Slowing and turning, the columns of renegade vehicles headed through this breach like water rushing for a hole in a dyke. Coming into range they poured more fire onto the ends of the severed cordon line. The Knight continued its assault, crushing a Deathstorm pod beneath its foot even as the automated turret spewed a hail of missiles into the oncoming war engines. Behind, another Knight opened fire; the crackle of arcane technology seared through the smoke to obliterate another outpost.

In their wake the transports accelerated, crashing and bumping over the uneven terrain, small armoured cars speeding alongside. Interceptors peeled away as Azrael ordered his gunships to stem the sudden rush of tanks heading towards the aegis-line.

'Lanval's foresight is impeccable,' Azrael told the others. 'Here, at grids fourteen and fifteen. They are hoping to punch through just one part of the line, overwhelm us with successive waves against a narrow front. We can halt the attack with just a single solid counter-offensive. We'll blunt the assault, catch the lead elements against their own following forces and then turn them around one flank with an armoured noose.'

He quickly reeled out orders for his reserves from the armoury and Deathwing to commit, as well as for two of the companies on the wall to mount up in transports for a counter-attack through the uncontested ground to the west. The heavy weapons of the Devastators had engaged the nearest tanks, who in return were slowing to lay down a barrage of cannon and multilaser fire against the aegis-line.

'They are making our task even easier,' said Dagonet. 'Already they are slowing down their own second wave.'

A hissed intake from Ezekiel caused the Supreme Grand Master and Master of Sanctity to look sharply at their companion. The Chief of Librarians was not looking at the screens, his gold-flecked gaze directed to something no other could see.

'Codicier Vanael has detected something,' Ezekiel whispered. 'A psychic disturbance. It is similar to the warp echoes we detected before the Night Lords' arrival at the Iron Stalagmite.'

Before Azrael could inquire any further, Radagal attracted his attention.

'My lord, the Knights are changing the axis of their attack. They are coming directly towards the centre. Towards us.'

'Let them,' said Azrael. 'Our wall cannons will give them a hot greeting for their folly.'

'My Librarium brothers are of accord,' Ezekiel continued. 'I feel it also. A shifting. A veil splitting.'

'The Night Lords show themselves at last,' said Azrael. He glared at Radagal. 'Where? Where are they coming through?'

'No anomalous energy signatures, my lord. If they are–'

'They come,' growled Ezekiel. 'By the Lion's bane, their sorcery is powerful!'

Knowing that technology alone could not detect or predict the sorcerous ways of the enemy, Azrael had to see the battlefield for himself. He sprinted to the stairwell and mounted the steps three at a time until he reached the roof lookout.

To his right the white Land Raiders of the Deathwing pushed out from the line and disgorged their Terminator squads into the heart of the enemy armoured offensive while a storm of weapons fire blazed past between the tanks.

Around the First Company, infantry squads surged like the froth of a tide up a beach, thousands of hereteks and renegade soldiers stumbling and running past the broken remains of the outer line, flowing past the wrecks of tanks and defence emplacements.

In the far distance, the hills burned with plasma flames while the bombardment

from orbit continued. The blur of warheads and supersonic shells fell like monstrous hail, each detonation illuminating the battlefield with a flare of bright death.

The Knights seemed uncaring of the counter-attack to their rear and were, as Radagal had warned, heading directly for the command tower. This brought them across the line of advance of the companies Azrael had despatched in the encircling manoeuvre. The Rhinos of the Dark Angels fell back from the armoured giants, awaiting the support of weapons capable of harming the war machines of the traitor Adeptus Mechanicus.

'That way.'

Ezekiel had followed close behind and pointed to the north west. Through the murk Azrael could see the red-gold shimmer of opening portals, just like the ones at the Iron Stalagmite, though larger by far.

Midnight-clad vehicles and squads disgorged from the swirling rifts, just a few hundred metres from the aegis-line. Heavy weapons from both sides opened fire, criss-crossing the cratered plain. Azrael counted twenty, then thirty, then forty traitor legionaries, and more still arrived. The breaches continued to widen and the first Land Raiders pushed through. More outlandish creations lurched and lumbered into view – shrieking, snarling monstrosities of metal and unnatural flesh melded together by prohibited sorceries and malign technology. Whip-like tentacles writhed and cannons glowed balefully with their own life.

The force advanced swiftly, contemptuous of the bolter fire that rained down on them. Even with his auto-senses, Azrael found it hard to mark out the Night Lords in the murk of smog and fires. As the traitors advanced they trailed shadows like smoke, coils of concealing darkness that followed them from the warp rifts.

'Get Sammael!' he barked over the vox to Radagal. 'I need an immediate counter-attack! And air support. Target priorities on the Knights for every gunship available.'

He looked up, the flare of fire between the duelling aircraft above not an encouraging sight. As he watched, another portal appeared, perhaps a kilometre above the battlefield. He expected to see aircraft emerge, but the thing that broke out of the exposed warp was no piloted machine. A drake-like body of lightning-wreathed metal and bone hauled itself from the breach with an ear-splitting screech that could be heard even over the raging cacophony of battle.

Jagged wings swept out trailing storm clouds like some obscenely vast chick still wet from its hatching. A thunderclap shook the ground as the beast swooped

down. Its serpentine neck flexed with a shriek of tormented metal as it cast its gleaming gaze along the line of defensive embrasures and bunkers. A thunderhead of darkness and lightning streamed as the heldrake dived to the attack.

# DATE IDENT: 113940.M41#0845

The horrific semi-mechanical abomination fell upon the squads of the Fourth Company to the east of the command tower. Bolter fire sprang up from the walls to patter from the armoured skin of the onrushing beast, accompanied by the crack of missiles and sharp flare of plasma.

Raking fire erupted from the cannon set within the beak-like maw of the creature, every round trailing sparks of unnatural energy as they ripped into the armoured warriors manning one of the gun emplacements. Metallic claws flashed as the heldrake crashed bodily into the Dark Angels streaming along the aegis-line. Power armour shattered beneath the terrible assault, half a dozen warriors of the Chapter laid low by the monster's crushing impact. Its rampage continued, serrated wings shearing through ceramite and bone, the fire of its maw-cannon like the breath of a mythical beast.

'Radagal, concentrate all available firepower on the Knights. Assault reserve to engage the Night Lords.' Azrael sprinted to the wall just as Dagonet reached the roof of the tower. 'With me, brothers!'

The Supreme Grand Master vaulted over the wall. He fell several metres, gauntlet scraping over the Angel of Death cast into the ferrocrete before they found purchase on the crosspiece of its sword's hilt. Azrael pushed himself away and plunged the last ten metres to the rampart below.

He landed hard but recovered instantly, bounding into a run along the wall towards the mechanical drake. Ezekiel and Dagonet followed at a slightly less precarious pace, a few metres behind their commander.

'Ballan! Bring half your squads. Now! The rest provide fire support for the assault reserve.' The Lord of the Rock continued to snap out orders as he pounded along the aegis-line, accumulating squads like a comet's tail. Reaching

the first revetment he leapt, the muscle bundles of his armour launching him onto the roof. He landed without missing a stride and bounded down on to the next line of parapet. ‘Radagal, I want orbital support redirected immediately.’

He was still three hundred metres from the rampaging monster. Master Zadakiel had rallied several squads around his banner and was directing fire at the beast flapping and screeching along the wall. Bolt rounds exploded harmlessly against the infernal construction; missiles left blackened blossoms against the lightning-wreathed metal but did little damage.

Fire screamed in from the Rhamellian tanks not yet engaged by the Deathwing. Shell detonations rippled along the rampart in a rolling salvo. Flame and shrapnel surrounded Azrael as a round exploded right in front of him. He plunged on through the shock wave, ignoring the shriek of his power armour’s warning chimes.

Through the churning thoughts that swirled in his head, Azrael realised that the Night Lords had held the advantage since the outset and he had acted exactly as they had desired. The orbital strike against the artillery had drawn away the wrath of his deadliest guns. The Ravenwing had been forced to the flank of the army by the armoured thrust, away from the Night Lords’ point of entry. Even his premature commitment of the reserves had only served to direct forces away from the aegis-line, to allow the Night Lords the opportunity to emerge within the outer line against a depleted defence.

As he hurdled a Rapier Destroyer he could not help but think he was doing exactly as his foes intended. The heldrake was just close enough for the counter-attack, but far enough to draw forces from directly in front of the Night Lords’ line of advance.

But he could not do otherwise. The line was tested at four points along its length and he could not afford to allow one part to fail. He needed the gun turrets and squads of the centre to hold back the Rhamellians. He did not appreciate the irony that the foe he deemed weakest was the most likely to break through at that moment.

Blurs of darkness sped overhead as Thunderhawks, Nephilim fighters and Dark Talons banked hard over the aegis-line to engage the renegade Knights. Ion fields flared into scarlet clouds as they shunted aside battlecannon fire and missiles. Super-heavy weaponry roared and crashed in response; the blast of laser and volleys of shells scythed through the smoke-filled air. Azrael watched a Thunderhawk split open from cockpit to tail by a coruscating beam of energy, its burning remnants crashing down into the hereteks surging towards the Dark

Angels wall.

The constant stream over the vox had become a half-heard murmur. Azrael listened only for one voice – Radagal's. The logistarius filtered out the mass of communication; his calm reports highlighted only the most pertinent developments.

Despite the anarchy that seemed to reign, the battle was still in favour of the Dark Angels. The Night Lords had used all their cunning and sorcery to gain every advantage, and the numbers of the hereteks and renegades would soon start to take their toll, but for the moment the line held.

Crossing the roof of another strongpoint, Azrael threw himself down onto the wall just one hundred metres from the warp-spawned monster. He unslung his weapon – the artificer-created bolter-plasma gun known as the *Lion's Wrath* – and drew the *Sword of Secrets*.

Behind him, *Traitor's Bane* trailed cerulean fire in Ezekiel's fist and sparks of psychic energy flashed in the Librarian's eye. The aquila-shaped head of Dagonet's crozius arcanum gleamed with a silvery powerfield, a plasma pistol in his other hand.

'Keep it grounded,' Azrael bellowed as he raced towards the beast.

The heldrake swung towards him, a flailing battle-brother gripped in one claw. The creature opened its maw to reveal the multi-barrelled cannon that jutted from its throat. The weapon started to spin with a building shriek.

Azrael opened fire at the same moment that Ezekiel unleashed a blast of psychic fire. Plasma and unearthly energy slammed into the creature's mouth. Molten metal spat and streamed as the heldrake thrashed backwards, coughing streams of liquid fire.

Bolts continued to spatter harmlessly from the silvery metal of its hide. Its tail whipped back and forth, slashing the head from another Dark Angel. Rivulets of cooling metal hung between sword-fangs as the heldrake lumbered towards Azrael, claws striking sparks from the armoured floor of the rampart.

Dagonet dashed past, his crozius lifted to deflect the claw that swung towards Azrael's head. The Master of Sanctity flew back from the blow, clattering hard into the battlement. Azrael struck, cleaving the edge of the *Sword of Secrets* into the exposed neck of the mechanical nightmare. He ducked underneath the reeling monstrosity, dragged his blade free in a spray of oily blood.

Ezekiel swung two-handed, lopping away a claw raised against the Supreme Grand Master, tendrils of psychic energy playing from sword to wound.

A flare of plasma flashed into the beast's eye from Dagonet, who crouched at

the wall's edge, one arm hanging limp at his side. Azrael moved quickly, rolling under a wing that tried to buffet him from the wall. The *Sword of Secrets* sliced through intestine-like cables in the creature's underbelly, bringing forth fresh rivers of life fluid that splashed across the Supreme Grand Master's armour.

The heldrake reared back, wings beating frantically. Ezekiel lashed a bolt of lightning into the beast's chest, scorching through metal and bone with an explosion of multicoloured sparks. Azrael dropped the *Lion's Wrath* and thrust his fingers into the ragged wound he had carved into the monster's gut. As it lifted from the ground with laboured sweeps of its wings, Azrael rose with it, his grip tight about a metallic brace inside the beast's body.

The Lord of the Rock rained blow after blow against the exposed innards, twisting, thrusting and hacking with little skill or grace, widening the wound to a gash two metres long. His robe was soaked through with gore and lubricant, the heavy fabric clinging awkwardly to his armour joints. One final thrust pushed the point of his blade deep towards the heldrake's chest and the semi-daemonic beast spasmed, one wing furled as it spiralled away from the wall before rolling over towards the ground.

There was no chance to get clear and Azrael was dragged down with the monster. It crashed into the inferno-baked earth amidst a storm of metal splinters and exploding rock shards. The impact almost tore Azrael's arm away and whiplash cracked his head hard against the beast's metal flesh.

Dazed, Azrael rolled away, falling heavily from the carcass. Ears ringing, he struggled to stand. A death-judder from the heldrake sent a twitching wing crashing into Azrael just as he gained his feet, knocking him to his back again. His fingers groped for the *Sword of Secrets* as he turned to his stomach and looked up. He was several hundred metres from the aegis-line. Armed once more, he staggered away from the steaming corpse of the heldrake.

The dull thump of munitions and crack of bolters seemed strangely muted and distant.

'This is Azrael, respond,' he said even as his fingers moved to the side of his helm and found a finger-long rent across the side where the vox transmitter was located. Only crackling answered. A distracting static buzzed across his auto-senses and he twisted off his helm with a hiss of escaping air.

He drew in a deep breath, the air tainted with the fume of battle and the stench of blood. Recovering his senses, he assessed his situation.

The enemy had reached the wall at several points. The Night Lords were almost at the aegis-line and several hundred hereteks scrambled over piles of their own

dead to reach the rampart while purpose-built siege automatons strode through the dying masses with crackling hammerhands, telescopic ladders and grapnel launchers at the ready.

One of the Knights had been felled; its burning wreckage spilled more black smoke over the oncoming hordes of traitor soldiers. The other two mechanical giants loomed through the murk, barely half a kilometre from Azrael's position, only minutes away from the command tower.

The Deathwing were closer than the wall, their ivory armour stark against the camouflage green-and-grey of armoured vehicles and the blackened earth. Around Lanval's banner a knot of Deathwing Knights led the counter-attack. Their blades and maces broke open the hulls of tanks, shields raised against the torrent of incoming fire.

Azrael took several steps towards them, picking his way across the strewn wreckage of the heldrake while flames consumed the unnatural corpse. A hissing sound caused him to slow and turn.

Just past the burning remains the air churned. At first he thought it vortices of the fire, a trick of heat haze, but over several seconds the whirling became stronger, more distinct. Motes of energy danced in the smoke, spiralling towards a central point where a star was beginning to form.

*Run!*

The word slammed into his thoughts like a boarding torpedo breaching a ship's hull. He winced as pain flared behind his eyes.

*Run, Azrael!*

It took a moment before he recognised the voice of Ezekiel, though louder and fiercer than he had ever heard it pass his lips. Despite the Librarian's insistence, Azrael's body refused to respond. He stood transfixed as the swirl of particles became a pulsing hole, a widening gap through the barrier of reality into a place far removed.

He averted his gaze at the last moment, knowing that to look into the abyss of Chaos itself was an invitation to madness, even for an iron-willed Space Marine. The thunder of the portal's opening shook the ground and the carcass of the heldrake heaved and fell into a widening ravine as rents opened crazily in the hardened earth.

Azrael dared a glance at the abyssal breach and saw darkness coalescing into a monstrous humanoid form. While he watched, smaller breaches tore at the fabric of the material world, orbiting the central portal like slave moons. Outlandish shapes writhed in their hearts, embryonic nightmares clawing and gnawing at the

veil to spawn into the world of mortals.

*RUN!*

The psychic imperative forced its way through his mental defences and earthed through his nervous system like lightning down a rod. His body responded before conscious thought caught up with events and his legs took him away from the portal and the emerging nightmares.

Adding will to psychically impelled instinct, he pumped his arms, covering the ground with three-metre strides. He ran with a steady pace, fuelled not by the raw fear of a normal man, but the cold knowledge that his doom was truly bearing down on him. He could see his battle-brothers flooding to the rampart ahead, a thicket of bolters and heavy weapons springing into view. A golden gleam signalled where Ezekiel stood, one hand held aloft as psychic forces churned and swirled the air around him.

The shadows he had glimpsed danced at the edge of his thoughts, daring him to look back. He tried to fix his gaze and thoughts on the sanctuary of the aegis-line but the phantasms created by his imagination were more compelling – he knew the reality could not be as nightmarish as the mirages conjured by his primal reactions.

He glanced back and found that his imagination was poorly matched against the insanity of the warp.

# DATE IDENT: 114940.M41#0852

Blackness coiled from the writhing warp portal, streaming like vapours from the jagged edges of the tear between dimensions. The thing that lurched from the abyss was made of the shadow, real and not real, twice the height of Azrael. Faceted spider eyes clustered at the centre of its mass, glinting in the flare of battle. Tenebrous limbs more tentacle than jointed legs propelled the daemon onward, six of them, tipped with iron claws that fountained sparks of red from the ground where they touched.

And mouths.

More mouths than Azrael could count, filled with serrated fangs; shifting, gnashing, whip-tongued maws that appeared and vanished across the shadow-beast's body.

Distracted, Azrael did not see a jag of broken Thunderhawk hull buried in the ravaged earth. His foot caught against it and he fell, rolling onto his shoulder out of instinct as a razor-edged fin of armour speared up towards him.

He crashed and tumbled, grip tight on the *Sword of Secrets* as he slid down the slope of metal, churning fresh welts across the burn-scarred paint.

Snake-quick, he regained his feet, blade at the ready.

The shadowbeast came on, but it was not alone. The black tendrils that seethed back to the portal gathered together, twining about each other like rope.

A clawed fist appeared, holding the shadow-lines.

A leash.

The monster that followed was as tall again as its insane hound, twice the size of a Dreadnought. It was clad in a warped mockery of Tactical Dreadnought armour – thick plates of midnight blue that bulged and shifted like flesh, edged with gold and white like the armour of the Night Lords it led. More lightning

flickered, crawling across the armourskin in waves, pulsing with the tread of hooved boots.

Its head and face were elongated and fleshless, with growths flaring from its temples. A winged skull, the symbol of the traitor legion. True wings swept out fromt its back, in span the equal of a Nephilim fighter.

The hand not holding the shadowbeast's tether was almost as big as Azrael, a dagger-tipped gauntlet that gleamed with hellish energy. A nightmarishly exaggerated power fist, the Supreme Grand Master realised, with the twin muzzles of a large cannon protruding from the back, a ruddy infernal gleam emanating from the barrels.

The empty sockets of the daemon prince's eyes fixed on Azrael and a coldness chilled him.

'What have we here?' The daemon's voice carried like a cold wind, soft yet biting. 'Another whelp of the Lion, come to deny me my rightful conquest.'

'You have no place here, spawn of nightmares,' Azrael growled. He took a pace closer. The plate of Thunderhawk armour creaked under his weight. 'This world belongs to the Emperor.'

'The Emperor is dead, orphan of Caliban. He died at the hands of Horus. You have been lied to for ten thousand years, lion cub. There is no power on Earth, just a carcass whose strings are pulled by the ambitions of weak humans.'

'It is you that lies. The Emperor defeated Horus. Your crusade is over, your Legion shattered. There is nothing for you here, dark flame of Nostramo!'

The daemon had no features but the jolt of its head signified surprise.

'That is right, son of Night Haunter, I know the darkness from whence you came,' Azrael said, advancing slowly, paying attention to the flex and moan of the Thunderhawk wreck beneath his feet. 'Caliban died, but the Angelicasta survived. You think we do not have records of the Heresy, when all was anarchy and betrayal? I know you Night Lord. I know your kind. Ten thousand years you have lusted after the dominion of the Emperor, and for ten thousand years men like me have held you back. Today it shall be the same!'

'You throw around names that mean nothing to you.'

The daemon prince pulled back on the leash of its shadowhound, causing the grotesque monster to whine and gibber with frustration. 'You have no knowledge of the deeper mysteries, just children's books with bright pictures. The World of Night is no more – I hail from a far grander realm.'

'And you will see it again soon, son of Curze.'

'Do not use that name, Lion's pup!' Motes of redness flashed from the daemon

prince's eyes. 'It is a dead thing, of no value. There is only one title that you need speak. The Painted Count demands your subservience and you shall grovel before me to be granted it.'

'I see that ten thousand years has not settled your delusions,' Azrael said with a forced laugh. He had almost reached the top of the slope, twenty metres from the daemon prince. 'I am Azrael, Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels, Lord of the Rock, Scion of Caliban, Commander of the Angelicasta. I bow only to one power and He resides on Terra! You... You are not fit to scrape the mud from the tracks of my Land Raider.'

'This world shall be mine, Lion's whelp,' the Painted Count said with a deep laugh. It lifted up its monstrous hand and lightning crackled across the splayed fingers. 'It is too late to stop me.'

A dozen wrinkles in the air became splits in reality, and from each spawned a dozen more, spreading out across the battlefield, scattering across the sky. Warp power churned and an unnatural storm boiled the smoke clouds while purple beams of coruscating energy leapt from one abyssal gate to the next.

Azrael watched impotently as the portals widened, stretching and distending, revealing crowds of nightmarish entities pushing and clawing as though trapped behind flexible glassite.

'Be thankful you shall not live long enough to see the world fall and your brothers devoured.'

The Painted Count released the shadow-tether of its infernal hound. With a screech of joy it bounded forwards, limbs a blur, phantom mouths spraying spittle.

Reaching the summit of the slope, Azrael steadied himself to meet its charge, a shoulder turned towards it, the *Sword of Secrets* held in a two-fisted grip. He fixed all of his attention on the approaching daemonbeast, blotting out the horrendous moans and screams that cut the air, the flare of purplish otherlight as the Painted Count's host started to burst through the veil that held them back from Rhamiel.

The thing lurched, one moment a dozen metres away, the next upon Azrael, a flailing, snarling cloud of blackness that engulfed the lord of the Dark Angels. A hundred mouths snapped at his armour, countless teeth rasped and scratched at the plate. Droplets of spittle hissed and burned where they fell on the enamel, and stung the flesh of his exposed face.

He swung the *Sword of Secrets*.

The blade was a shard of silver in his hands. Its light separated the body of the

shadowhound to leave frayed tendrils of darkness parting around Azrael. He had expected resistance and met none, almost overbalancing, at the last moment throwing out a hand to seize hold of a jutting spar to stop an awkward tumble back down the slope of armoured plate behind him.

Oily black rain spattered across him and onto the ground, each a tiny quivering creature for a second until they splashed together into a puddle at his feet. The surface seethed and boiled, quickly vanishing into nothing.

Azrael pointed his sword at the Painted Count, a silent challenge.

The daemon nodded in acceptance. It arched its back, exposing a heavily ribbed chest. The bones shifted and split, breaking open to reveal the gory cavity within. The Painted Count reached inside its chest and seized hold of a bright gem that pulsed like a heart. As the daemon pulled it free the jewel elongated, becoming a long blade of dark red that left after-images of shadow on Azrael's vision.

Daemonblade in one hand, brutal powerfist encasing the other, the daemon flexed its arms and wings, obviously relishing the contest to come.

It levelled its fist to fire a stream of flaming blasts at Azrael.

The Supreme Grand Master narrowly evaded the salvo, forced to hurl himself to one side, seeking better footing as the Painted Count laughed again.

The air behind the daemon prince shimmered. A corona of gold and emerald formed around the creature, flickers of energy spreading out like cracks in the air. The Painted Count adjusted its aim and cocked its head to one side.

'Good bye, Lion whelp.'

A golden shard appeared in its chest, pushing through from behind. For a moment the daemon prince stood transfixed, immobile, eyes widened in shock. Auric power rippled from the needle of gold like flame along paper, consuming the daemon prince, stripping away its physical shell in seconds.

A cloud of gold-edged ash fluttered away, as though driven by a wind, to reveal a figure. As tall as Azrael, though slender of waist and shoulder, swathed in a scarlet robe embroidered with curving silver sigils. The gold shard was revealed to be the point of a sword, no wider than a finger, slightly curved with a basket hilt. In the figure's other hand was clutched a staff headed by an intricate sun design, wrought from gold and precious stones. Black gloves covered long, narrow fingers. An ornate full helm enclosed its head, adorned with oval gemstones that gleamed with a light not from Rhamiel's sun nor the fires of battle. Jewelled eye-lenses regarded Azrael with their sapphire gaze.

Even if he had not known what it was he looked upon, the moment the figure

moved – the simplest of motions to lower its sword to its side – it was clear that Azrael looked upon no human. Effortless grace defined the figure, a lightness about its person so that it seemed barely of the real world at all, but instead perhaps a reflection of something distant.

One of the ancient and mysterious eldar.

# DATE IDENT: 114940.M41#0900

Across the battlefield the fluctuating abyssal rifts spasmed and wept golden energy. Bruises on the veil of reality became iridescent spheres; the half-seen daemons within shimmered and the wails of their anguish flooded over the renegades and Dark Angels.

Where the unholy entities of the warp had been making egress into the realm of mortals, graceful craft swept out from flickering arches of gold light. Swept-wing aircraft and sleek grav-tanks slid effortlessly into being from the void portals, their hulls the same red as the robe of Azrael's saviour. Behind came flights of jetbike riders in scarlet and black, long pennants trailing from their speeding mounts.

More portals opened in the distance, delivering alien warriors against the renegade artillery corps and the last infantry columns still marching down from the foothills. A particularly blinding flash of auric power opened up a wavering gate twice as tall as the Dark Angels command tower and from its whirling depths strode two immense walkers – elegant war machines with slender limbs as tall as the Knights, with cannons and blades to match the might of the hereteks' renegade engines. Pulses of blue energy leapt from their guns to catch the closest Knight unaware, punching through its rear armour.

As its companion fell, the last surviving Knight ponderously turned, its directional field flaring when the eldar walkers redirected their attack, its multi-barrelled cannon roaring a violent defiance. Alien vehicles and jetbikes curved and raced, encircling the labouring rebel tanks, xenotech weapons scything and blazing.

'If you think to feed on the scraps of our battle, you will find they have a nasty bite left in them,' Azrael told the eldar that had slain the daemon, brandishing the

*Sword of Secrets*.

The eldar regarded him silently, poised elegantly on a rise of rock just a few metres away. The golden portal from which the alien had emerged fluttered several times and a handful of other figures appeared, also garbed in robes and odd bone-like breastplates, bearing swords and spears. Their helms were less ornate, their finery not as ornamented as their leader.

'We do not come for you.' The eldar's voice drifted on the wind, each syllable pronounced with soft precision, its mellow tone neither deep not high-pitched. Azrael could not tell from the voice nor the slim build of the alien whether it was male or female. 'It is the slaves of the Dark Gods that feel our wrath today.'

'We do not need such aid,' growled Azrael. 'This world is not yours to protect.'

'Pride, warrior of the Emperor, is a terrible weakness. I do not think you truly believe you had retained the upper hand in this battle.'

Azrael knew the alien spoke the truth, but would never admit as such openly to one of the xenos. The arrival of the eldar had averted what had looked to be another disaster, but he was not yet ready to claim victory.

'You have not answered to your purpose in coming here. What is the world of Rhamiel to the eldar?'

'This planet is not yet safe. Though its banishment seemed dramatic, the Painted Count is not vanquished, nor is its dark host. We are able to keep their power at bay for a while longer while we slay their mortal allies, but that will not keep them from this world for long.'

'You propose a truce? Unite against a common foe? You still have not told me your motive for this intervention.'

'Such is the gratitude of the Emperor's sons,' the eldar said with a long sigh.

'Such is the nature of alliance with the eldar,' Azrael snapped back. The alien responded with a lilting laugh and a tilt of the head.

'You are not wrong.' The alien sheathed its blade and took up its staff in both hands. 'I am… My name would be Walker on Grey Paths in your tongue. I know from our intercepts of your communications that you are Azrael of the Dark Angels.'

The Supreme Grand Master said nothing. He heard cautious calls from behind and glanced over his shoulder to see that a small knot of Space Marines had ventured from the aegis-line – two squads led by Ezekiel and Dagonet.

'Hold your fire,' he shouted back, raising a hand to forestall any such behaviour.

'Your warriors are quite safe, Azrael of the Dark Angels,' the eldar told him,

though he knew better than to trust the word of an alien.

'I ask one more time, and if I do not receive a clear answer there can be no alliance. What is your purpose in coming here?'

'Speak not with the xenos!' Dagonet bellowed, coming up past the broken Thunderhawk fuselage. 'Lies fall from the tongues of the eldar as easily as rain from clouds.'

'Do not make any bargain with it, Azrael,' warned Ezekiel. His eye was a shimmering orb of gold, the wires of his psychic hood blazing with power as he confronted the eldar. 'It is a farseer, a high warlock of their kind.'

'Enough!' The harshness that entered the alien's voice was a stark contrast to the mellifluous air of moments before, like the stroke of a soft glove that became the crack of a barbed whip. 'Time is not our friend.'

'You have an answer?' Azrael asked, motioning for Ezekiel and Dagonet to stay back a short way.

'A common foe and vested interest,' Walker on Grey Paths told him. 'Your gifted companion is correct – I am a farseer, a teller of prophecy and unwinder of the skein of fate. If you are not victorious today, your foes will claim Rhamiel and from here their taint will spread to threaten our home in the future. Today offers us the best opportunity to cut that thread of fate and protect our people.'

'You buy your security with the lives of the Emperor's faithful.'

The alien offered no argument against this. Dagonet moved as though about to speak but Azrael raised his hand to quiet him.

'You could have intervened earlier,' he said slowly, gaze fixed on the farseer. 'If you wished to cleanse Rhamiel of the infernal taint, you had opportunity to slay the rebel leaders before today. Why wait until battle is engaged?'

Another tilt of the head. Azrael thought the farseer amused, but the words that followed were not spoken in humour.

'Your insight is a credit to you, Azrael of the Dark Angels,' said Walker on Grey Paths. 'This battle will not seal the safety of my people. There is another, a sorcerer of the faction you call Night Lords. It is his power that allowed the Painted Count to break the veil to this realm. He was hidden to my sight, but has revealed himself now.'

'We were bait in a trap?'

'More than that. We require you to hunt down the Dark Summoner. I need your help, Azrael of the Dark Angels.'

'What can I do that the eldar cannot?'

'The Dark Summoner has a ship in the outer system. A fortified lair surrounded

by a guard of enhanced warriors.' Walker on Grey Paths swept a hand to encompass the raging battle. Scarlet-hulled craft and flights of jetbikes zoomed and slashed through the renegades, who in turn pressed towards the unforgiving guns of the Dark Angels. Overhead Thunderhawks, Nephilim, Dark Talons and eldar craft circled each other warily, some diving down to strafe the enemy tanks in swift attack runs while others flew patrols over their own forces. 'My people require room to manoeuvre. We do not like to fight in confined spaces. It would cost a great many eldar lives to prise free the Dark Summoner. Your warriors are hardened to brutal assault.'

Azrael did not bother repeating his accusation that the eldar were spending the lives of his brothers for their own benefit. The farseer either did not acknowledge the sacrifice or simply didn't care.

'I warned that time is short. The Painted Count is not banished, merely inconvenienced. The Dark Summoner will return its master to the battlefield before night falls.'

'If the sorcerer is hiding in the outer system it would take days to reach him,' said Dagonet.

'That is not the alien's intent,' replied Ezekiel. He pointed his sword at the golden portal that still shimmered behind the farseer and its entourage.

'Is this true? You think we would use your diabolic gates to reach our enemy?'

'My companion, Blade of Winter Tears, will guide you,' said the farseer. One of the other eldar stepped forwards, a curved blade in one hand. 'She will make the parting of the ways and take you to the heart of the Dark Summoner's void castle.'

Azrael retreated several paces, never taking his eye from the eldar. Dagonet and Ezekiel came closer, sensing his desire for council. The accompanying Space Marines spread out, their weapons levelled at the eldar cabal.

'You cannot trust this creature,' Dagonet said.

'I do not,' Azrael assured him. 'But that does not mean it is lying.'

'We are being manipulated,' the Chaplain countered.

'We were being beaten.' Azrael said quietly, his gaze moving from Dagonet to Ezekiel. 'Again. You were right, the omens were poor for today. What do you see now, Master of the Librarius?'

'I am not an eldar – I do not conjure visions of the future on a whim,' Ezekiel snapped.

'Tell me, then, whether you feel the infernal host is still close at hand. Can you sense it?'

The gleam of the Librarian's psychic hood became more diffuse, extending from his helm for several seconds.

'There is a darkness upon the warp. I hear the scratching of overthings, their whispers in our waking dreams.'

'Walker on Grey Paths is telling the truth, it seems, or part of it.' Azrael tightened and then relaxed his grip on the *Sword of Secrets*. 'I do not like this situation, but we have little choice. If the eldar wished us ill they could have attacked at any time since our arrival. I do not know how their scheme will play out, but I see no alternative but to hunt down this sorcerer, for the sake of Rhamiel.'

'Alliance with the aliens?' Dagonet could not keep the disgust from his voice. 'It is against every teaching of the Chapter. What honour is there in such a bargain?'

'Better our honour than a world lost to the darkness,' Azrael growled. He turned on his heel and strode back to Walker on Grey Paths. It seemed as if the farseer had been immobile during the entire conversation, a statue that came to life again at his approach.

'Twenty warriors, that many the web-strand can carry,' said the farseer before Azrael had even spoken of his assent. 'Your best will be required to defeat the Dark Summoner and his creatures.'

'I do not trust you, Walker on Grey Paths. Not all of my brothers will return from this venture. My life may be the cost. We will not be your puppets. If this mission is so important to your people, what sacrifice do you offer in return for that?'

The farseer did nothing for several heartbeats. And then, almost too swift to follow, reached to the gem set in the middle of the bone-like breastplate and plucked it free. It sparkled with its own light as the eldar stepped forwards, the jewel proffered to Azrael.

'I have no need for baubles,' said the Supreme Grand Master. 'Its value is meaningless.'

'This is my spirit stone, Azrael of the Dark Angels.' It was impossible to be certain with an alien, but the Space Marine detected sadness, a deep and profound regret, in the voice of the eldar. 'You shall never understand how important it is to me, nor the power it contains. It will suffice as hostage, for if I should die without it, my spirit is forfeit and I shall be eternally damned. I entrust my fate to you, warrior of the Emperor.'

Azrael held out his hand and the farseer dropped the spirit stone into his palm.

He felt its warmth, but not in a physical sense. The soft throb in the heart of the gem pulsed through his thoughts, his feelings. The rhythm was mesmerising, and it was with an assertion of will that he broke his eyes from the gem and thrust it into a pouch at his waist.

'Do not lose it,' whispered Walker on Dark Paths. The farseer pointed to Ezekiel. 'I would speak with your warlock, if I may. There are details of the Dark Summoner's powers that only one with the gift of warp-sight would understand.'

Azrael nodded and returned to the others.

'Ezekiel, choose two of your best psykers to accompany us. The farseer wishes to speak with you.'

The Librarian nodded and moved past Azrael to approach the eldar. 'Dagonet, my vox is broken. Contact Lanval. I would have ten of his warriors as escort. Belial amongst them, if he still lives.'

'Not Lanval himself, my lord?'

'I will not rob my Chapter of all its best commanders in one action. You will remain also, as witness to what has occurred. Choose your two most diligent Chaplains – I feel we may be in need of spiritual as well as physical and psychic strength in this endeavour.'

'Asmodai and Cathas,' the Master of Sanctity replied without hesitation. 'Their zeal is unmatched.'

'If I do not return before nightfall, kill the eldar.'

'I will be sure the farseer pays for any treachery.'

'Not just Walker on Grey Paths. Kill them all. If we do not return, whatever the price, you will make the eldar rue the day they courted the wrath of the Dark Angels.'

# PART FOUR

# DATE IDENT: 114940.M41#1423

The eldar called Blade of Winter Tears waited for the Dark Angels, a barely visible silhouette against the white-and-gold shimmer of the portal. Belial stomped past Azrael, his squad close on his heel.

'Your pardon, my lord, but you are not entering that infernal conjuration first,' declared the sergeant. 'Squad, prepare arms.'

The four other Terminators assembled around their sergeant. The glow of power fists gleamed from their ivory armour but fell strangely on the fabric that clothed the eldar warlock, as though absorbed by the silky robe.

'Let us be about this endeavour without delay,' Azrael told his men. He looked at Walker on Grey Paths. 'Any duplicity will be punished.'

'Of course, Azrael of the Dark Angels.'

At a nod from the farseer, Blade of Winter Tears stepped to the threshold of the portal, sword raised as if in salute, coruscations of power rippling along its length. Azrael signalled to Belial and the Deathwing advanced towards the gate. As they approached, Blade of Winter Tears stepped forwards, the edge of her sword parting the rift before her.

With Belial in the lead, the Terminator squad of Sergeant Caulderain at the back, the Dark Angels marched through the breach between worlds.

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

Azrael had expected something akin to teleportation – an endless but instantaneous half-moment of transition followed by an explosive re-entry into reality aboard the target ship.

Instead he found himself in a tunnel, with an arched roof, as though made of deep grey marble veined with purple. Slender golden columns and vaults held the walls every few dozen metres. It seemed almost solid.

Almost.

As he turned his head quickly to the side, to check Ezekiel was still at his shoulder, he caught a glimpse beyond the passage. Through the wall. Stars, distant and cold, obscured by a glittering curtain of rainbow colours. It lingered now on the very edge of his vision.

Ezekiel's face was unmoving, as though set in stone. There was not the faintest flicker of psychic energy in his eye or from the tracery of his psychic hood. Looking over his shoulder, Azrael saw that the other two Librarians, Epistolaries Dalgar and Maldarion, were likewise rigidly passive in expression.

'It would be unwise to look with our inner eyes,' said Dalgar, guessing Azrael's question from his look. 'Not while in this unnatural burrow.'

Azrael sped up, passing Belial's squad to come alongside Blade of Winter Tears.

'Can you speak our language?' he asked. 'How long until we arrive at our objective?'

'One cannot expect a beast to speak, so we learn to interpret the meaning of their grunts and barks,' the eldar replied.

'Arrogant xenos f–'

Azrael glanced back to see Ezekiel holding out a hand to restrain Asmodai,

whose crozius blazed in his hand.

'Stand down, Chaplain,' growled Azrael. 'Save your ire for the traitors.'

The passageway continued ahead until hidden by the haze of distance, without rise or fall or turn. There was light but from no source, and a sense of weight, or gravity, though Azrael knew logically that they traversed the empty void of space.

'How far? How long?' he asked again.

'The stride of a god, within his heartbeat,' Blade of Winter Tears replied, still with gaze fixed ahead. 'The journey shall take as long as it takes – your expectation and prior knowledge will make it neither longer nor shorter. I will warn you when we are approaching the Dark Summoner.'

They continued on in silence. Total silence, Azrael realised. Not a footstep from the massive Terminators, nor even a creak or hiss of actuators. It was disturbing, and after some time the lack of auditory input started playing tricks on his mind, as did the illusory nature of their confinement.

It seemed to Azrael that perhaps the walls were real, after all, and he and his companions were ghosts. It occurred to him that the eldar had betrayed them and now only their shades remained, wraiths being taken to some soul-prison for whatever vile practices the aliens employed for their witchcraft.

He felt the weight of the *Sword of Secrets*, and tried to reassure himself that it was real, that he was real. Blade of Winter Tears walked with such ease it seemed she barely moved, every swing of her arms and every stride efficient and effortless. Azrael resisted the urge to reach out and touch her, to prove to himself that she was also more than just phantasm.

The monotony of their silent journey, the endlessly repetitive surrounds, made time meaningless. He understood why their guide had refused to be drawn on a specific time of arrival. Distance in this place was not set.

'We have arrived,' the warlock said, stopping, her voice sudden and startling.

The tunnel seemed unchanged, going on infinitely in front and behind the Dark Angels.

'Where?' asked Azrael.

'I have not yet spliced our thread to that of the sorcerer's domain,' Blade of Winter Tears replied. 'We are close. I will attempt to release you into the starship as close as possible to its heart where the Dark Summoner resides. It is impossible to do so perfectly. I cannot say how much further you will have to proceed on the far side of the veil.'

'You speak as though you are not coming, warlock,' said Ezekiel.

‘That would be wise,’ said Azrael. ‘We cannot afford to lose her – she is our only means of returning to Rhamiel.’

‘That is correct. I will remain within the threadway and seal the gap between realms when you have passed through. You will need to return to the point of entry. I will sense you and bring you back.’ The eldar looked around, obviously at something other than the mirage of the corridor. ‘You must return as swiftly as possible. We are safe here for the moment but this threadway is only temporary. I can protect it from assault for a while but not indefinitely.’

‘Very well.’ Azrael took a breath, looked at his companions to assure himself they were ready, and then nodded to the alien. ‘Do it. Open the portal.’

As before, Blade of Winter Tears ceremonially cut the air in front of her. Azrael could see no change with the look of the everlasting passage.

‘It is done,’ said the warlock. When Azrael remained where he was, she stepped back and looked at him for the first time. Her helm’s eyes were ruby-like ovals, betraying nothing of the face within. ‘You cannot see it? How did humans survive this long with such dull senses? Simply walk past me and you will come upon the starship of your prey.’

The *Sword of Secrets* sheathed, Azrael took up the *Lion’s Wrath* in both hands. He turned his back on the eldar to address his warriors.

‘The mission is simple. We locate the traitor sorcerer and eliminate him. Kill anything that attempts to stop us. All other considerations are secondary.’ He stepped in front of Belial as the sergeant attempted to pass him by. ‘I lead this time.’

Azrael squared himself in the tunnel and advanced to where he thought the breach was located. He could feel the faintest of vibrations at the nape of his neck.

He turned to look at his companions, but as he twisted he felt the tunnelway slip backwards, receding rapidly away from him until it was nothing more than a bright spark, and then just a memory.

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

The ring of his boot on metal confirmed to Azrael that he was back in the material realm. The weight of his gun, the sigh of fibre bundles settling, the thrum of generators and buzz of electrical cables were all welcome signals that he was alive and real.

He continued forwards a few paces, allowing the others room to exit the eldar portal as he analysed his environment.

It was dark; the only light came from a few buzzing red globes set behind wire mesh in the ceiling of the chamber. The room itself was out of use, and appeared to have been abandoned some time before. It was a few metres wide, twice as long, a wheel-locked door at the far end.

The walls sagged oddly.

He stepped closer and saw that in fact it was not the walls themselves that curved into the floor but an accretion of... something he had not encountered before. He would have taken it for spraycrete, but it recoiled slightly at his touch. Not so much soft as hollow.

A grunt of distaste caused him to turn. Belial was on the opposite side of the room, peeling back a layer of the material like pulling a scab from a wound. The analogy seemed even more disgustingly apt as a pulsing, fleshy undersurface was revealed.

‘Throne’s heart,’ growled Cathas.

Belial let the covering flop down and his power fist glimmered back into life.

‘Which way?’ Azrael asked, looking to Ezekiel.

The Chief Librarian convened with the other two psykers and they communed for several seconds, saying nothing. They gathered closer, drawn to one another, a nimbus of power faintly glowing around them.

Ezekiel broke away from the others, leaving a slight after-figure of golden light in his wake.

'We have found the heart of the darkness. This way.'

The lock-wheel on the door screeched into motion at a gesture from the Chief Librarian. The grate of corroded metal set Azrael's nerves on edge.

'I am sure a clarion blast would have announced our presence more succinctly,' said Belial.

'Our presence is already known, brother-sergeant,' Ezekiel replied coolly. He waved and the door swung inwards with a drawn-out creak. 'Head left. The enemy are gathering.'

Azrael allowed Belial and his Deathwing to take the lead again. Operating in close confines against a deadly enemy was their speciality. Following them out, flanked by the two Epistolaries, Azrael stepped into a corridor wide enough for the Terminators to advance two abreast. The same strange cladding covered the walls and ceiling, the lighting spheres set within puckered orifices, the faint stench of blood on the air mixed with oil and sweat.

'Incoming signal,' warned Belial.

The squad halted. For the first time since leaving the Deathwing, Azrael felt slightly adrift without his sensorium link. He was no longer enmeshed with the others, a step removed and reliant upon their reports.

With a wheeze like a dying lung expelling its last breath, a hatch opened in the floor a short distance ahead. A wire-thin figure clambered out, skin so pale as to be white like the creatures found in lightless caves. It was naked, deep pink welts covering its alabaster flesh. Massively dilated eyes turned towards them. The boy, for such it must have been, flinched at the sight of the Terminators, baring black gums and stubs of teeth. With a rattling cry, it dived back into the darkness beyond the hatch.

One of the Terminators moved forwards, storm bolter aimed at the opening. While he guarded the entry point the rest of the squad advanced past. Movement from the squad behind urged Azrael and his companions forwards without any word, but it was clear the two Terminator squads were acting in unison, guiding their charges towards the objective.

He glanced past the Deathwing warrior on overwatch. The hatch led into pitch blackness, joining a crawlspace just a metre below the deck. There was no telling how many enslaved crew lurked in the gaps between the halls and chambers. Would they resist, or simply allow the Dark Angels to pass unhindered?

Azrael allowed the Terminators to perform their duty and lead the way along the corridor, which became dank a few metres on. The floor was slick with mould fed from the drips of a broken pipe that jutted from a cavity in the wall-flesh.

'Which way, Brother-Librarian?' Belial asked when they reached a T-junction at the end of the passageway.

'Left,' replied Ezekiel. 'We must find somewhere to descend. The sorcerer is somewhere in the middle decks amidships.'

'The arterial hall is this way,' said Belial, pointing to the right. 'It may be the swifter route, even if less direct.'

'Go left,' said Azrael. 'The confines suit us better than our foes.'

Belial offered no argument and led his squad down the left-hand passage while the other Terminators trained their guns to the right.

The dampness increased, the humidity growing as the heat rose. Thin mist hung in the air, glinting in the ruddy light. Belial pressed on directly into the ship at the urging of Ezekiel, passing several smaller chambers. Azrael glanced through the next door as they passed.

'Wait!' He stopped at the threshold for a better look.

It had been a dormitory of sorts. The remains of bunks stretched down each wall, broken lockers beside each triple-stacked set of cots. Thin, patched blankets lay strewn over the floor and bed frames. Buckled metal plates and bowls were scattered about, along with wooden spoons and upturned serving platters. Old food rotted in the mesh of the deck.

There were emaciated bodies amongst the detritus. Almost skeletally thin, skin peeled back from lesions across their chests, backs and shoulders. Rictus grimaces contorted their faces, but even so they appeared to have died in terror. Their fingers were bloody and broken, as though they had clawed at the walls and doors, perhaps trapped, trying to escape.

A shadow flickered across the far wall.

'Movement,' he told the others, bringing up *Lion's Wrath*.

'Nothing on the augur system, my lord,' Belial replied.

Azrael was certain he had seen something. He thought to take a step closer to investigate but changed his mind.

Dead flies and maggots covered the bodies and he spied the mangy, furred corpses of rats amongst the debris.

'Even the vermin died,' he whispered, retreating a pace. He focused on their purpose. 'Keep moving. The sorcerer must be slain.'

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

Sounds of industry from ahead had the party advancing with caution. Chains clanked, ratchets ticked, metal squealed. The light that spilled from the arches and doorways flickered as though cast by flames. Shadows moved through the light, indistinct and jerky.

They arrived at a wider area that stretched up to a vaulted ceiling encompassing several decks above and below reached via ramps and winding metal staircases. Lines of spindly naked figures laboured at pulleys and capstans, raising and lowering five platforms, each large enough to carry a Thunderhawk. More of the withered minions worked at loading and unloading the platforms, toiling with a monotonous intensity.

'Nothing but bone and sinew,' said Belial. 'A miracle that they have the strength for such labours.'

'A dark miracle. Spite and hatred bring their own peculiar strength,' replied Ezekiel.

Corpses. The cargo was an unending mass of cadavers, marked by the same wounds and lesions as those Azrael had discovered earlier. By the hundreds they were laden onto the platforms, lowered and then dragged off at the bottom some twenty metres below.

The source of the strange light became clear. There were rows of furnaces on the bottom deck. Rather, furnace-like openings in the walls. The gleam from within the huge ovens was like no normal flame, tinged with purples and greens that left bizarre shadows lingering on the edge of vision.

The bodies were fuel for these despicable furnaces, bundled without ceremony through open grates in front of each doorway. Despite the scores of corpses being thrown into the infernal fires every few seconds, Azrael saw no smoke

issuing from the flames, and could detect no charnel smell. The hellish furnaces consumed everything.

'Where are the overseers?' said Asmodai, turning to the left and right, his pistol seeking a target. 'Someone will pay for this butchery and degradation.'

'No life signs...' muttered Garvel. 'Why are there no life signs?'

'They need no overseer, brothers,' Maldarion said ominously. He strode towards the closest line of labouring figures and grabbed one by the arm, jerking her from her place.

The woman did not respond as he turned her towards the others. Her face was slack; her arms fell uselessly to her sides. Her eyes looked as though they were filled with black fluid, dark and oily, but otherwise devoid of any spark of intelligence or life.

'Dead?' Azrael stared at the creature in Maldarion's grip. 'By what power?'

The dead thing sprang into life, its face snapping towards Azrael. It lunged at the supreme Grand Master, caught in the Librarian's grasp. With a noiseless snarl it ripped itself from its own arm with a crack of bones and spurt of blood, swiping broken-nailed fingers towards his face.

The *Sword of Secrets* parted it from shoulder to hip with one blow. The animated cadaver fell to the deck, still jerking and flailing.

The hall resounded with the pattering of thousands of bare feet as the dead slaves broke into shuffling runs towards the interlopers in their domain.

The Deathwing opened fire, their storm bolters shredding the closest corpses in a hail of rounds. Azrael let loose a blast of plasma, incinerating two emaciated foes, while around him the others let free the fury of their bolters and pistols. Brother Damactus in Caulderain's squad unleashed a jet of burning promethium from his flamer, catching more than a dozen targets with the burst of white fire. The corpses continued to rush the Dark Angels even as their bodies were consumed by the intense flames coating them.

'Movement below!' Belial warned.

Azrael turned to the closest steps. The slave-corpses at the furnaces had dumped their loads and were also pressing towards the stairs and ramps, black eyes turned up to those that sought to destroy their creator.

'There must be thousands of them,' Caulderain said. His power sword lopped the heads from two creatures as they reached the top of the stair. 'Blades and fists, brothers. Save your ammunition.'

The Deathwing formed a two-part wall between the horde of living dead and their officers. Within a few seconds the mound of the vanquished was as tall as

the warriors as they hacked and smashed with power swords and blazing fists. Garvel stepped from the line, wading into the sea of enemies with broad swings of his thunder hammer, his storm shield crushing more against the rails and bulkheads that lined the hall. The lightning claws of Brother Maldevor coursed with arcs of destructive power as he slashed and swiped, scattering severed limbs and heads.

'Make way, brothers.' Ezekiel did not raise his voice, but was heard easily across the crash of storm bolters, crack of powerfields and the snarl of Temenael's chainfist.

Without thought, Belial's squad parted to allow the Chief Librarian and his two companions to pass. Ezekiel advanced ahead of the Epistolaries, the triumvirate of psykers bathed in a cerulean glow of power. The Master of the Librarius cut down a walking corpse with his blade and smashed another aside with his backswing, making space for Dalgar and Maldarion to step alongside.

As one they thrust out their swords, each lancing their blade through the chest of a foe. The azure field that enveloped them spasmed and waxed stronger and brighter, boiling along their embedded weapons. Like a tsunami hitting a shore, the wave of blue burst out from the Chapter psykers, the touch of its lightning-flecked aura turning each corpse in its path to motes of flying dust.

Outwards and onwards poured the banishing wave, streaming and undulating from the swords of the Librarians, focused through *Traitor's Bane* in the grip of Ezekiel. A score of enemies, a hundred then a thousand were swept away by the wall of ravening warp energy.

Ezekiel's hands started to quiver; his shoulders shook with the effort of maintaining the flow of psychic power. With a gasp, Dalgar reeled back and fell to one knee, his sword clattering to the deck from weak fingers. Maldarion reached out his free hand and laid it upon the shoulder of Ezekiel, adding his physical and mental strength to that of his Brother-Librarian. A fresh pulse of immaterial fire flared through the thronging dead, leaping with a life of its own from one animated cadaver to the next, pouring up and down the decks as though possessed of a vengeful intent of its own.

Cursing, Maldarion too recoiled from Ezekiel as though struck by a blow, half spinning away from his master. Fronds of gold and black electricity coruscated across his armour for a few seconds before earthing through the gore-spattered deck.

Now alone, Ezekiel turned slowly, his sword sweeping the cleansing fire in an arc across the hall. He took a slow step forwards, twisting his sword to send a

fresh flurry of power pulsing down into the furnace level.

'Open fire!' Azrael urged the others, who had been as equally mesmerised by the psychic display. 'Cut our way through.'

The Deathwing formed a solid wall again, anchored on Ezekiel at one end of their line. As their bolts flew into the miasma of power churning through the hall they caught alight with its cleansing touch – each round sliced through a dozen foes before exploding with blue bursts of fire. Asmodai thrust himself into the pressing mass of corpses with a battle chant spilling from his lips, his crozius arcanum a blur of shimmering power that split open heads and crushed chests. Beside him Cathas was more measured in his attack, laying his own crozius upon those that eluded the frenzied assault of the other Chaplain. Metre by metre, they pushed into the seemingly endless horde, advancing along the hall beside Ezekiel, a score of broken foes for every stride taken.

'Can you walk?' Azrael demanded, stepping up to Maldarion. 'Dalgar, are you hurt?'

'We will recover,' Dalgar assured him, pushing to his feet. He reclaimed his sword. 'My lord, our master should not expend all of his strength here. We cannot say what trials still lie ahead.'

Azrael saw the immediate truth of this. Ezekiel was aflame head to foot with the power of his cleansing energy, but within the nimbus he was shuddering, shoulders flexing uncontrollably, head jerking to the left and right as though in the grip of a seizure.

'Ezekiel!' Azrael moved to lay a hand on the Chief Librarian but Dalgar pushed aside his arm before he touched.

'That would be unwise,' the psyker warned.

'Ezekiel,' Azrael said, again, quieter, as a companion rather than a commander. 'That is enough, Ezekiel.'

With a howl more animal than human, Ezekiel tore himself away from his own conjuration, letting the fires gutter and die around him as he staggered back into Azrael. The Supreme Grand Master threw out an arm to catch Ezekiel as his legs gave way, giving him just enough support to stay on his feet.

The Chief Librarian pushed away, sparing just a momentary glance at his superior, flakes of burning paint falling from his armour, a hue glowing on the lenses of his helm like the gleam of molten gold. He turned, set his shoulders, adjusted his grip on *Traitor's Bane* and then set upon the enemy once more, laying his blade against the foe in more mortal fashion.

The corpse-slaves were little threat individually – even those that fell on the

Space Marines with lengths of pipe, chain and crude tools could not harm them – but their numbers alone would stifle the Dark Angels' advance.

'Deadlier foes are coming, I am certain of it,' Azrael told his brothers as they pressed into the crowd of inhuman enemies thinned by Ezekiel's psychic assault. More continued to approach from above and below, stumbling from behind and to each side. 'These soulless shells would suffocate our advance with their bodies given the chance.'

'Push hard, brothers,' Belial urged his squad. Caulderain followed suit and the two sergeants formed the point of a spearhead, breaking into a run, their sheer bulk battering aside the cadaver-puppets that staggered into their path. The other Terminators followed on, pulping bodies beneath their boots, weapons silent for the moment.

Azrael and the other officers came on after them, paying no heed to the foes around them, confident that their war-plate would hold against the scrabbling claws and ineffectual blows from the handful of corpse-slaves that hurled themselves into the vacuum behind the advancing Terminators.

They reached the far end of the hall, guided to a double arch by the directions of Ezekiel. Azrael stopped at the corridor entrance and turned to take stock of the situation. The massive chamber was heaped with the bodies of the slain, ripped by bolt, crushed by power fist, charred by psychic fire. Vapour rose from the body piles like a mist, swirling around the distant skeletal figures that lurched through the gloom.

In the distance, more were coming. He could hear them above the crackle of furnaces and the creaks and groans of the ship itself. Hundreds of feet, slapping and pattering on the metal deck.

'We'll hold them, Lord Azrael,' said Caulderain, motioning his squad to turn and take up a defensive position around the two archways.

'Dalgar,' said Ezekiel. 'Remain with the sergeant and be alert for fresh sorcery.'

The Epistolary nodded and joined the Terminator squad, flecks of light shimmering around his force sword.

'We will return for you,' Azrael promised the group. He held up the *Sword of Secrets* in salute. 'Hold the line and know that the strength of the Lion is in you.'

Ezekiel had already started down the broad corridor, the nimbus of power around *Traitor*'s *Bane* the only source of light. The golden aura played upon fleshy outcrops from the plasteel walls, caught on vertebrae-ridged vaulting and jutting, spiny growths that quivered and clashed like grasping fingers at his approach.

‘How much further, Master Librarian?’ Asmodai asked as the others fell in quickly behind the Holder of the Keys. ‘How close is the sorcerer’s lair?’

‘Two hundred metres, Brother-Chaplain,’ Ezekiel replied.

The hiss of power weapons and bark of storm bolters followed them down the corridor as Squad Caulderain’s rearguard began.

When the Dark Angels had covered half the distance to their objective, the Night Lords attacked in strength. Belial shouted a warning, alerted to an energy surge by the sensorium grid just moments before the first bolts shrieked out of the darkness. Azrael spied a gleam of portal lights, a purple hue that appeared for just a few seconds.

‘They are behind us,’ he growled, turning with *Lion’s Wrath* at the ready. The flicker of bolt propellant lit the gloom a moment before three rounds exploded across his chest plastron, showering him with ceramite flakes.

Asmodai opened fire, bellowing curses as his bolts streamed back down the corridor into the shadows. Azrael held, finger on the trigger, ready to fire the plasma gun of his combi-weapon. He ignored two more bolt impacts on his backpack, peering into the gloom that persisted despite the auto-senses of his armour.

‘Maldarion, relieve us of this cloying umbra,’ the Supreme Grand Master commanded, still seeking a target.

‘They have gone,’ reported Belial even as a glow of white light from the Librarian’s upraised fist thrust back the living darkness.

‘Hit and run,’ said Cathas. ‘A tactic of the outnumbered. I think we overestimate their strength. The greater part of their host must be committed to the surface.’

‘I agree,’ said Belial as he started down the corridor once more. ‘We will draw them into direct confrontation.’

‘Wait!’ Ezekiel shouted, but his warning came too late.

The floor erupted around the lead Terminators like a massive jaw closing. Fang-like, steel-and-bone points swung up and punched into the armour of Belial and Garvel. Caught in the shoulder and midriff, the sergeant gave a cry of pain. The other Deathwing warrior made no noise at all, pierced through the chest, his armour no more protection than a padded vest. Blood streamed to the floor, where hissing midnight-blue beetles scurried from the cracks and gratings to feed on the thick lifefluid of the Space Marines.

Inhuman appendages thrust and swung at the Dark Angels; serrated horns and

grasping fingers clawed and hacked at their armour. Issuing a long moan, a doorway beside Azrael opened, spilling forth a swarm of wasps formed of lightning and fog. Engulfed, the Supreme Grand Master swatted with his blade, to no effect.

The crackling, buzzing cloud swirled, filling his auto-senses with their flickering and droning. He glimpsed bright flashes of light but only when his armour registered the impacts did he realise that the traitors had returned to waylay the stricken Dark Angels.

Blinded, he kept moving, throwing himself towards the opening from which the psychic swarm had emerged. With the *Sword of Secrets* held before him like a lance, he charged, half-expecting to crash into the bulkhead.

Instead he met soft resistance, a sound like tearing cloth as his blade parted whatever he had encountered.

'By the Lion, this is not the end of me,' he snarled, plunging through the tatters of flesh, bloody fronds slicking over his armour like tongues.

Though coated in grime and blood, he was free of the infernal swarm. A few wasps clung to his arms and legs; others zipped fitfully around his helm. The room was little more than a maintenance conduit, dominated by a confluence of pipes and cables to a series of black-screened panels on the far wall. Cracks in the wall let in more beetles, while slugs as long as his arm oozed through a fissure in one corner.

He turned and pushed back through the bloody opening into the corridor. Just a few metres away a Night Lord levelled an ancient meltagun at Asmodai, who was now beset by the swarm, roaring and flailing.

Azrael fired before the traitor, turning his head and chest to ash with a blast of plasma. The smoking remains of the Night Lord's armour collapsed, the archeotech weapon falling from his dead grasp.

Behind, two more traitor legionaries fired their bolters at Azrael, stitching a crossfire of shots across his chest and pauldrons. He ducked into their fire, firing the bolter of the *Lion's Wrath* in reply. The closest Night Lord reeled back as detonations raked his helm and faceplate. The second dived past Azrael, hand outstretched for the fallen meltagun.

Caught between the two foes, the Dark Angels commander's momentum carried him into the first, the *Sword of Secrets* burying itself to the hilt in the traitor's gut.

The Night Lord smashed his bolter into Azrael and grabbed his wrist in the other hand, trapping him as the meltagun's generator whined into life behind the

Dark Angel.

Azrael swung the *Lion's Wrath* towards the other Night Lord. A small reticule in his vision, fed from the targeter built into the weapon, danced across the traitor's faceplate, not quite on target.

A flash of white light split the air. Asmodai emerged from the blinding pulse, the eagle head of his crozius arcanum buried deep in the skull of the Night Lord. The corpse's legs and arms twitched when the Chaplain ripped his weapon free.

Azrael elbowed aside the other Night Lord's bolter a moment before the legionary opened fire; the crack of the rounds echoed back from the ceiling. The Dark Angel twisted his blade, opening up the wound in the Night Lord's gut. He lifted a foot and stamped hard, ramming the heel of his boot under the chin of the traitor, smashing his head back into the metal of the deck.

Thrice more he kicked, cracking open the Night Lord's helm, turning the skull within to blood-coated shards.

'Vengeance,' growled Azrael, 'finds you even after ten millennia.'

He slid the *Sword of Secrets* free from the traitor's body and turned back to the others.

The others had prised Belial free and dragged aside the body of Garvel. Meritus and Turivael, with Ezekiel behind, had positioned themselves on overwatch a few metres further on, but the Night Lords had disappeared once more, leaving the shattered bodies of three more casualties.

'I shall hold here,' declared Cathas, standing guard next to Belial. The sergeant seemed barely conscious, his heavy armour slumped against the wall, one side coated in his blood. 'We shall watch your and Caulderains' backs. Find and slay the sorcerer quickly, my lord, so that we might quit this cursed place.'

'Meritus, you will remain also,' said Azrael, striding to join the Master of the Librarius. 'Turivael, Galad, advance in our wake and destroy anything that tries to come behind us. Lead the way, Ezekiel, as quickly as you dare.'

'Swiftness shall be our shield,' the Librarian replied.

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

Azrael, Asmodai, Ezekiel and Maldarion quickly outpaced the Terminators. The light from the Chief Librarian's psychic hood pushed ahead of them like a bow wave, the shadows ahead darker than ever as if in response to their intrusion.

Azrael could not see what energies swirled around the Chief Librarian but he was certain that more than light preceded their approach – it was impossible for him to know what mystical duel he fought, what immaterial shields Ezekiel and his Brother-Librarian projected around the advancing Dark Angels.

The ring of metal on metal reminded him of the more obvious battle taking place behind as their Deathwing brothers intercepted another attack. Storm bolters barked and the hiss and snarl of detonating plasma followed them along the broad passageway.

Though they no longer had the sensorium of the Terminators, the othersight of Ezekiel and Maldarion led them unerringly towards their target. They took a branching tunnel decorated with parts of broken skulls. Shattered mandibles and pieces of cranium flowed through the half-flesh surface to merge into faces that silently leered and snarled at the Dark Angels.

Two large figures loomed out of the darkness ahead – a pair of Night Lords in slab-armoured suits of Terminator armour. Even as the muzzle flash of their autocannons blossomed, Asmodai moved, leaping in front of his companions. The conversion field set within his sacred rosarius flared into blinding life as he charged straight into the converging streams of shells.

'I shall break them as the Lion broke the walls of Kanna!' the Chaplain bellowed, accelerating while hunks of ceramite and slivers of metal stripped away from his armour like the tail of a comet, splintered by the rounds that passed through his energy shield.

Azrael and the two Librarians followed close on his heel, understanding Asmodai's intent. The Chaplain was an ebon-black figure in the heart of a silver star as he crashed into the closest traitor Cataphractii. The impact sent a shock wave reverberating down the tunnel, rippling the walls as it boomed past Azrael.

Asmodai's arm was like a piston as he laid his crozius into the helm of his foe, blow after blow after blow, each strike accompanied by a shout of pure rage. Azrael did not stop, but stormed past the two traitors to plunge into the hell-lit chamber beyond the open metal gateway they guarded.

The Supreme Grand Master could not have mistaken the hall for anything other than the heart of the sorcerer's lair. It felt as if he had broken into some gigantic beast's ribcage; massive bone vaults soared above, their summits surrounded by a swirling cloud lit from within by orange and red gleams of unnatural power. Shadows cast through ancient stained glass windows hung like webs, almost tangible in the fume that issued from pulsing orifices in the floor.

Bizarre sculptures broke the expanse, more half-seen in the distance. All were of wretched, horrific figures. One bronze crouched, holding entrails that spilled from a gaping abdominal wound, another cowered in terror with eight-fingered hands covering her eyes. A goat-headed dwarf leered with a serpent's tongue while centipedes crawled from its long, ragged beard. A dark granite skeleton in voluminous rags plunged stiletto fingers into its own bony chest, piercing heart and lungs sculpted in red marble within.

Upon a dais some twenty metres distant the largest of the displays loomed over the macabre exhibition. Great loops of intestinal ropes hung down from the walls, glistening with fluid. Where they joined, a robed figure squatted on all fours, bat-wings furled upon its back. Its startlingly youthful face was a picture of ecstatic joy, eyes uplifted, mouth slightly parted.

With a screech like metal tearing, the figure stood, not a statue at all. Its wings stretched out with a drawn-out creak.

Vermillion eyes regarded Azrael from an impassive face as the Dark Summoner seemed to continue to uncoil, robes billowing like a cloud boiling from an abyss.

'You have destroyed so many of my toys.' The voice came from all around the chamber, issuing from the mouths of gargoyle figures set into the walls several metres above Azrael. 'Now I will destroy you, vulgar one.'

'Here you die, spawn of the night,' Azrael declared. He advanced with the *Sword of Secrets* held ready for the attack. 'Your unholy existence ends now.'

The Supreme Grand Master felt a pulse of energy emanate from the sorcerer – nothing he could see or hear, just a sensation that jagged along his nerves and

made his bones itch.

A babble of groans, gargling and moans swelled up around him. Uttering piercing shrieks and plaintive wails, the things he had taken to be sculptures roused from their dormancy and threw themselves at him. A bronze golem with shards of ice for fingers tried to seize his throat while a crow-faced satyr pounced upon his back, wrapping a cold metal arm across his face.

Sword in hand, Azrael punched the golem in the face, cracking open the cast metal. He hacked his blade into the monstrosity that followed it, before throwing himself backwards into the wall to smash apart the thing that clawed across his back.

Ezekiel appeared, *Traitor's Bane* burning as though pure white flame, parting every creature it touched. At his shoulder advanced Maldarion; forks of purging lightning flared from his fingertips. An inhuman shriek boiled out of the speakers above and the animated figurines turned from Azrael to fall upon the psykers.

Azrael knew better than to waste the opportunity bought by the attack of his battle-brothers. Sword in hand, he set off down the hall, intent on the sorcerer.

The Night Lord warlock sensed his approach and turned his head. Closer, Azrael realised that the face was in fact a mask, the ruddy light coming from behind a smoothly fashioned visage.

With a contemptuous flick of a hand, the sorcerer hurled a bolt of blackness at the Dark Angel. It caught him full in the chest, but rather than the concussive impact he expected, instead he found himself entangled with strands of solid shadow that multiplied and lengthened, pressing against the joints of his armour as they sought ingress. Hooked tendrils flailed outwards, latching onto the walls and floor, and then constricted rapidly, trying to drag Azrael down.

He pulled and slashed, parting a few of the dark strands but others took their place, splitting and growing from the knot burning into his plastron. He glanced down and swallowed hard as a single lidless red-pupiled eye regarded him from the centre of the black mass.

Choking back his disgust, Azrael let *Lion's Wrath* drop and seized hold of the warp-spawn. His fingers slid into the amorphous mass, which seethed and congealed, spreading up his arms to engulf the vambraces of his armour.

Questing tendrils sought out his face, probing at his eyes, slipping loops about his head and throat. Tearing free a fist was like pulling his arm from set ferrocrete. The puckered wound quivered for a moment, revealing ichor-slicked innards before sealing.

Azrael snatched a frag grenade from his belt and primed it in his fist. Teeth gritted, he plunged his hand back into the monstrous creature.

The thing's otherworldly form contained most of the blast, though Azrael felt the heat and shock reverberate through his trapped hands. The warp-leech thrashed in pain and Azrael tensed, pulling his arms apart at the moment of its greatest spasm.

Ragged remains came away in his fists and he swung hard, pulping them repeatedly against the floor with relentless hard blows, smashing its flowing form against the metal again and again. The creature's tentacles melted away into oily trails, releasing Azrael from their grip.

He took up his weapons, turned on the Dark Summoner and opened fire.

Plasma splashed across the sorcerer, a fountain of white and blue droplets of fire sprayed across the dais. When the glow of the impact dissipated the sorcerer remained, unharmed.

Azrael had expected as much and was already running, a stream of bolts roaring from *Lion's Wrath*. Under the cover of this distraction, bolts exploding harmlessly across the torso of the Night Lords psyker, he leapt up to the dais, the *Sword of Secrets* already swinging.

A clawed, jointed appendage lashed out from within the folds of the sorcerer's robes. The limb caught Azrael's elbow, turning aside his blow.

A second extra arm speared into the softer joint material exposed under Azrael's shoulder, driving deep into the flesh. Shock coursed through him and blood poured out of the wound from the severed axillary artery within.

Azrael staggered back, his sword arm numb. His heel missed the edge of the dais and he toppled backwards, a fresh spray of blood exiting the wound as he fell free of the puncturing limb.

It felt like an age, the gleam of the sorcerer's eyes bright in his vision, before he crashed onto the deck and everything went black for a moment.

Shaking his head, clawing for the *Sword of Secrets* with his left hand, Azrael stared in disbelief as the sorcerer seemed to grow. As well as the additional arms, four arachnid legs pushed out from beneath the robes, lifting up the inhuman warrior.

Rolling to his feet, gasping and panting, Azrael glanced away to see Ezekiel bursting free from a crowd of puppet-statues, *Traitor's Bane* pointed at the sorcerer. Maldarion lay unmoving at the Chief Librarian's feet, his robes torn to shreds, armour split open in dozens of places.

Azrael lifted his blade to deflect a scything claw as the sorcerer stepped down

from the dais. The force of the blow almost knocked the *Sword of Secrets* from his weakening grip. The tendril-cables detached from the Dark Summoner's body, pouring filthy effluent and dark bile into pools across the deck.

'Kill it!' he bellowed to Ezekiel, hoping that with the death of the sorcerer the creatures it animated across the ship would also cease.

Ezekiel hacked the head from a troll-like assailant made of fired clay and threw out a fist. White fire pulsed across the hall to envelop the sorcerer. The Night Lord let out a screech from the speaker-gargoyles and scuttled backwards.

One arm hanging uselessly, sword in his other fist, Azrael advanced with deadly purpose. His superhuman blood had stemmed the bloodflow, though a thin trickle continued to drip down his armour and spread a crimson stain across his off-white robe. A fork of emerald lightning flared past to crackle across the sorcerer's body. Its robes had burned away, revealing chitin-covered abdomen and thorax. The wings flapped ineffectually, not large enough to lift its bulk.

'I am the beacon,' said Azrael. 'I am the light.'

He thrust the *Sword of Secrets* into the burning breast of the Dark Summoner. Sparks flew as the blade shrieked across its infernal hide, leaving nothing more than a ragged scratch.

He slashed with the edge of the blade, but a raised arm deflected the attack, at the expense of nothing more than a shallow notch in the sorcerer's armoured exoskeleton.

A barb-footed leg lashed out, catching Azrael in the gut, hurling him back several metres. He kept his footing this time, but before he could counter-attack, another spider limb cracked against his wounded shoulder to send sparks of pain burning through his mind.

*Together*. Ezekiel's voice was like the cool of a stream, cleansing the pain and hurt, calming and familiar. *We strike together, brother.*

Azrael held aloft the *Sword of Secrets*. A moment later a flash of power engulfed it, setting the silver blade gleaming along its length.

He lunged, spearing the tip of the shining blade into the point where a human's heart would be. The sorcerer twisted to avoid the blow, but the enchanted sword lanced through chitin and muscle, driving deep into the Dark Summoner's thorax.

Strength ebbed from Azrael as he pushed harder and harder. The combined blow of two spider-arms threw him back again, his plastron almost broken in half, chest burning with fresh pain. He kept his grip tight on his sword as he fell, pulling it free from the sorcerer's wounded body.

*The seer's stone. Its touch will scorch the daemon within.*

Azrael could hear the screech and pound of fists and claws against the Chief Librarian's armour and knew his companion was about to be overwhelmed. His near lifeless fingers fumbled at the pouch.

The Dark Summoner loomed high on its many legs, two limbs upraised, a crackle of black power pulsing between them.

The pouch snapped open, dropping Walker on Grey Path's gem into his palm. He almost dropped it, ducking as a rush of black sparks erupted from the eye holes in the sorcerer's mask.

With his left hand Azrael swung the *Sword of Secrets* at the Night Lord's head. The sorcerer flinched, but not quickly enough. The tip of the blade shattered its mask, revealing a nest of writhing maggots where its face should have been.

But the blow was just a feint. Azrael punched his right hand into the wound opened up by his earlier blow, sinking his fist deep into the thick tissue within.

He felt the otherworldly warmth of the spirit stone growing stronger until it started to burn his fist. He kept his grip tight as sparks of gold erupted from the wound. Silver and green light pulsed, while motes of red and purple started to flash across the sorcerer's chitinous shell.

The Dark Summoner froze, immobilised by the pulse of power thrust into its heart. Azrael thought his hand would be consumed, flesh and bone charred by the burning of the spirit stone, but still he did not pull away.

Cracks appeared in the armoured skin of the Night Lord, each erupting with a faint silvery gleam. Like glass fracturing, the sorcerer fell apart, collapsing into tiny shards at Azrael's feet.

Azrael found himself standing with fist out-thrust, flakes of blackness fluttering around him like ash. The clatter of metal and crash of stone accompanied the collapse of the Dark Summoner's animated minions.

The Dark Angel's hand was cold. He opened his fist and a trickle of silver and gold dust spilled between his fingers. Of the stone, nothing remained.

He turned, hand still outstretched, and looked to Ezekiel. The Chief Librarian stood among a pile of twisted metal, stone pieces and broken pottery, his robe torn away, ceramite chipped and scratched from many blows.

Ezekiel shook his head to the silent question.

'The eldar told me only that the stone contained a portion of his energy,' said the Librarian, 'anathema to the powers of darkness and the spawn of the warp.'

Azrael accepted this without further question, somewhat dazed by the turn of events. He looked back to where the Dark Summoner had been. A ring of

charred black stained the dais and deck where the possessed sorcerer had been immolated, but there was no other sign of its existence. Even the meat tendrils that had linked it to the ship had withered away.

He realised the pain in his arm had gone. He flexed his shoulder, feeling a dull ache. Whatever power had destroyed the daemon-kin had also partly healed his injury.

'We shall not leave our dead in this damned place.' Ezekiel's softly spoken words snapped him from his fugue. The Librarian stooped and picked up Maldarion's body. 'Lead on.'

They found Asmodai guarding the door. Beside the shattered ruin of the two Night Lords Terminators lay several more power armoured bodies contorted by violent demise. One side of the Chaplain's skull-helm was cracked and he had lost his right pauldron. He kicked a body out of the way to clear the footing for Ezekiel.

'This whole ship should be purged,' said the Chaplain.

'We do not have the time, brother,' replied Azrael. 'We must return to Rhamiel as swiftly as possible.'

They rejoined Dalgar, Cathas and the Terminators, and retrieved the body and weapon of Garvel on the way back to the eldar threadway gate. Belial moved with the support of his squad-brothers as they continued back to the chamber by which they had entered.

The corpses of the puppet-slaves littered the chambers and hallways, swiftly rotting now that they had been released from their unnatural animation. If any living warriors of the Night Lords survived on the ship, they were willing to allow the Dark Angels to depart without further molestation. If Azrael knew anything of their kind, it was likely they had already started murdering one another to establish dominance.

They reached the point of ingress and waited.

'Can you send a signal or something?' Cathas asked the Librarians. 'Tell the witch that we are here?'

'She knows,' replied Ezekiel.

As though in confirmation of his words, the far wall started to shimmer. Like water disappearing down a plughole, the air swirled as the gate opened, revealing a white-gold flicker of power that expanded to encompass the entire wall.

Blade of Winter Tears emerged, sword at the ready. She gestured once, an insistent wave of the hand.

‘Hurry, warriors of the Emperor! We have destroyed our foe, but uneasy peace holds on the world below.’

Azrael was not sure how long he had been away from the surface, but by rough reckoning he knew it had to be close to sundown – the deadline for his order to attack the eldar.

‘Tarry not,’ he told the others. ‘We have no time to waste.’

# DATE IDENT: UNKNOWN

Azrael ran along the endless tunnel, with the Librarians and Chaplains close behind. The Terminators followed after as quickly as their massive suits allowed, bearing the bodies of the dead.

Unlike the trek to the sorcerer's ship, he felt no dislocation or confusion. A thought burned in him, kept him focused as the seemingly timeless journey continued. A single desire carried him through the fatigue and aches that gripped his body. Azrael was possessed by urgency. He cared little for the lives of the eldar, or any expectation they might have for coexistence, but if his brothers attacked there would be casualties amongst the Chapter. Needless casualties.

If he was to prosecute the Hunt as best he could, Azrael needed every warrior fighting fit, every commander and member of the Inner Circle all striving for the same aim. He would not start his time in command of the Dark Angels by throwing away the lives of his warriors.

The eldar warlock kept an effortless pace beside the Space Marines, seeming to float along the infinite passage. It was impossible to guess at the thoughts of such a strange creature, but Azrael had to think that Blade of Winter Tears shared his concern, only hers was for the lives of her kind. And, he suspected no small measure of self-preservation, for she was surrounded by a dozen of the Emperor's finest warriors, whose wrath would be swift if they discovered battle had broken out on Rhamiel.

Without ceremony or word, Blade of Winter Tears darted ahead, blade flashing once before she disappeared through the cloven veil of reality.

Grunting, Azrael sprinted after, one moment racing along the immaterial threadway, the next pounding across the dark ground of the battlefield almost exactly where he had left. His boots skidded in the dust and grit as he came to a

halt.

# DATE IDENT: 114940.M41#1745

Azrael looked left and right, letting out an explosive breath when he saw his warriors arrayed along the walls of the aegis-line, tanks prowling back and forth before them while gunships circled overhead. Bright scarlet-and-black eldar grav-tanks swept majestically past, emitting barely a noise, weaving around each other in complex formation manoeuvres while jetbikes raced alongside.

One of the giant eldar walkers had survived the battle and stood half a kilometre away, its long cannons trained at the central command tower. Azrael had no doubt that in orbit Dark Angels ships had precise firing solutions locked into their targeting systems, to unleash a deadly bombardment the moment hostilities began.

Rhamiel's star was three-quarters set, a dull purple arc on the horizon, the shadows long.

Blade of Winter Tears stopped a short distance ahead. The other eldar psykers gathered around her protectively, a nimbus of energy gleaming from their swords in the twilight. Azrael heard the wheeze of Ezekiel's armour just behind and the deep growl of Asmodai.

'Stay your weapons,' Azrael warned them. His swift assessment of the situation left him with no doubts. Though the Dark Angels held a strong line, the eldar's skimmers would swiftly negate any advantages of the defences. On a personal note, battered and weary from his confrontation with the Dark Summoner, and a similar toll doubtless taken on his companions, he was not sure of victory against the cabal of eldar psykers close at hand.

He felt a momentary relief when Walker on Grey Paths stepped out of the group, staff in hand, blade sheathed. The farseer approached at a stately walk, eye lenses fixed on Azrael. Unease quickly returned when he remembered what

had happened to the spirit stone the farseer had given him. Would there be retaliation?

'The Dark Summoner has been destroyed, Azrael of the Dark Angels,' said Walker on Grey Paths. 'The banishment of the Painted Count has been fortified and the servants of the Dark Powers will assail this world no more. A catastrophe for my people has been averted.'

'Your... The stone...' Azrael slid the *Sword of Secrets* into its scabbard and held out his hands, empty palms up. 'I used the power of the gem to destroy the sorcerer. It... It is no more.'

'I know.' The two words were simply said, but carried a plethora of meanings – of expectation, of foreknowledge, of an understanding deeper than he would ever achieve. And accusation, reminding him of his demands for a sacrifice.

The eldar stepped closer, voice dropping to a harsh whisper.

'I have looked upon your thread, Azrael of the Dark Angels. Shadows follow you, darkness seeks you. You stand poised upon the blade of extinction and glory. Perhaps both in time will claim you. By your word planets will burn and billions of your own kind will perish. I see a wolf, wounded in its lair, your sword held ready for the blow. Execution or mercy killing? Whether your blade falls or not will decide the fates of countless worlds. Choose poorly and you will doom that which you have vowed to protect.'

At some unspoken word from the seer, the eldar started to move away. The warlock contingent strode past the Dark Angels, giving the newly emerged Terminators a wide berth as they headed towards the glimmering portalway. Everywhere across the battlefield new gateways of gold opened and the tanks and bikes of the eldar glided away.

'You told me that without the stone you would be eternally damned. Was that a lie?'

'You asked what I was willing to sacrifice for my people, Azrael of the Dark Angels.' Walker on Grey Paths withdrew until almost swallowed by the golden light of the gateway. 'You have your answer.'

'Wait!' Azrael took a step and held out his hand. 'There must be another way. There is always a chance at redemption!'

But the farseer had gone.

'How can that be?' he asked quietly, of nobody in particular, though Ezekiel chose to answer.

'They are a strange kin, enigmatic and capricious. Do not mistake self-interest for honour. We have nothing to learn from the eldar in that regard.'

But Azrael was not so sure.

# DATE IDENT: 119940.M41

The cold, dry air of the Rock was a comfort, a familiarity that told Azrael he was back where he was meant to be. He had fought many campaigns over his long years, but Rhamiel was the first that had left him with such unease. The Dark Angels had been victorious, for certain. Winning left him feeling worse than the defeats of the past. At what cost had the foe been vanquished? A favour from an alien? By what means had they been delivered from disaster? The whims of fate?

And the words of the farseer haunted him too. He could not wholly trust anything the eldar had told him. All of it could be lies to manipulate and deceive, for some agenda he might never unravel. Was it simply that he was now Supreme Grand Master? His new position and perspective brought fresh burdens and labours. He had claimed during his trials he would burn star systems, really no different from the assertions of Walker on Grey Paths.

Yet there was more to it. The psyker had known what would happen to the spirit stone, had seen the future so specifically that a chain of events was set in motion as predicted. And the farseer had spoken prophecy to Azrael, unheard by any of the others. The Dark Angel could not unravel the import of it yet, and perhaps might never understand.

But there was something else he needed to know.

He turned his head to the diminutive, shadowy figure that stood close to his desk. It looked at him with coal red eyes.

'I have to know. Show me. What manner of man am I? What is in my soul?'

*The girl stood over him. He wiped a hand over his mouth, smearing blood across his cheek and arm, still dazed. She pulled back the club.*

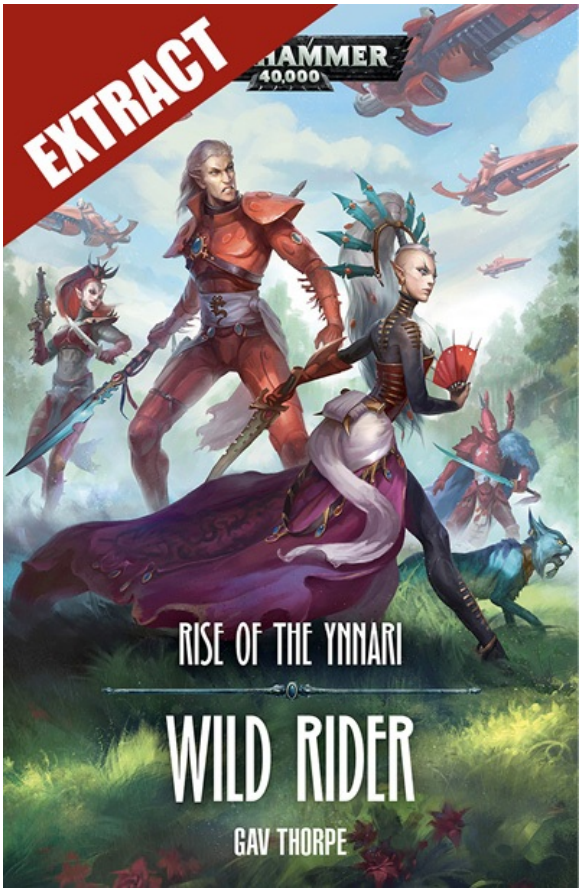
*A stone hit her in the temple and she toppled, falling across his legs with eyes*

*glazed. Another boy shouted, pointing at the unconscious girl, insistent, his meaning clear. Azrael picked himself up, still groggy, and retrieved his bone-axe. He drew back the weapon, ready to strike.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Gav Thorpe** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, and several audio dramas including the bestselling *Raven's Flight*. He has written *The Red Feast* for Age of Sigmar, as well as many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Ashes of Prospero*, *Imperator: Wrath of the Omnissiah*, *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*, *Rise of the Ynnari: Wild Rider*, *Jain Zar: The Storm of Silence* and *Asurmen: Hand of Asuryan*. He also wrote the *Path of the Eldar* and *Legacy of Caliban* trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Warhammer Chronicles omnibus *The Sundering*, and much more besides. In 2017, Gav won the David Gemmell Legend Award for his Age of Sigmar novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

**An extract from *Rise of the Ynnari: Wild Rider*.**



The Wild Riders ascended from the chasm in a scarlet spiral, looping around each other as they accelerated. To fly straight was to be predictable, an easy target for the necrontyr scythe-craft that banked sharply towards them, lit by the ghost-glow of their terrible weapons. As they speared towards the heavens, the virgin forests of Agarimethea spread below them, the wind-tossed canopy like a sea of green.

At their head, Nuadhu Fireheart rode upon a fighting platform atop the back of his Vyper, his pilot, B'sainnad, leaning over the controls in front of him. They shared mutual urgency across the spirit-connection of the Vyper. Crouched behind his pilot to reduce the drag on their vehicle, Nuadhu winced each time he heard the spine-chilling scream of a necrontyr Doom Scythe. His grip tightened on the long spear he wielded, known as the Drake's Fang, the purple flame that wreathed its elegant blade whipped by their passage.

Nuadhu felt a tremble of trepidation across the empathic psychic link with his kindred. The piercing shriek of incoming necrontyr attack craft grated on his nerves, but he pushed aside his growing dread and focused on the swirling vortex still some distance ahead.

At his back swarmed sixteen more Wild Riders, a little less than half that had set out with him on the expedition. They were mostly of Clan Fireheart, a few of them more distantly related kin from other clans. The long nose of each anti-grav steed and the banners that flew from their pillions bore the sign of the Cosmic Serpent alongside family runes, marking them as warriors of Craftworld Saim-Hann. Some had helms to conceal their features, topped with hair crests of bright colours streaming in the wind. Those with faces bared showed off colourful warpaint and tattoos of kin sigils and personal decoration. A few bore the scars of intricate branding, lines and swirls of white upon cheeks and brow.

There was one unlike any Wild Rider. Her steed was a reaver-bike of Commorragh, red also, but the shimmering crimson of spilt blood rather than the

scarlet of Saim-Hann. Even so, her warrior nature was evident from the bladed, serrated armour she wore. Much of her flesh was exposed between highly ornate plates, strategically positioned not only to protect vital organs, but to accentuate her physical charms.

Druthkhala, messenger of the Ynnari. She was the reason why the Wild Riders had come to Agarimethea, seeking the treasures of the ancient aeldari dominion. Glance drawn to the alluring curve of her leg as she straddled her jetbike, Nuadhu was reminded of why he had felt obliged to assist.

Just behind Nuadhu rode Caelledhin, his half-sister. The rune of the Icewhisper adorned her twin pennants and a scowl of concentration twisted her brow as she guided her jetbike around the turns of her companions. She wore her hair shorter than was customary, her shoulder-length black locks a legacy of her mother's lineage among the long blond braids of her companions.

*'This expedition was further proof of why you are not of sound judgement and should not rise to the position of clan chieftain.'* His half-sister's words were almost lost in the speed of their passage though they came to the messenger bead inserted below his ear.

'I have no ambition to do so yet. My father lies beneath the downward stroke of Death and you talk as though the blade has already parted him.'

'Our *father,'* she corrected. *'I do not look forward to his parting, it will pierce my heart as sure as any dagger blow, but we cannot ignore the fact that the fate of Clan Fireheart might balance upon the whim of a warrior who would strike out on a ridiculous quest to impress a potential romantic partner.'*

Nuadhu wanted to argue the accusation, but the edge of its truth bit deep. He was of no substance and the admission was bitter in thought and mouth.

Across the spirit-bond he shared his plan with the others, letting them see what he envisioned. As though moving his own limbs, he divided the flotilla into three separating streams, splitting apart as they soared higher. The diving wedge of necrontyr attackers broke as well, three coming after Nuadhu, two each turning towards the other Wild Riders.

'Druthkhala!' B'sainnad added a mental impulse of alarm to his shout.

Nuadhu saw that the Bloodbride had continued onwards where others had peeled away, oblivious to the psychic communion of the others. Noticing her isolation, she wrenched her reaver-bike into a tight arc, trying to evade a dropping Doom Scythe. She jinked in the opposite direction a moment later, an instant before a screech erupted from the craft and a white beam flashed through the air where she would have been. A second Doom Scythe looped around,

drawn to the solitary jetbike like a pack animal to wounded prey. Its underslung cannons crackled with artificial lightning.

A sudden flurry of crimson beams slashed across the ascending alien craft, scorching trails across the living metal of its hull. The larger shape of the Vyper piloted by Ithalaris soared between Yvraine's messenger and the Doom Scythe. From upon its back, Cualain fired the mounted scatter laser again, her salvo raking more welts across the necrontyr engine as it rolled away. They powered down towards the forest as the Doom Scythes adjusted their attack vectors towards the Vyper.

'Return to the formation,' Nuadhu told them. Joined to B'sainnad by the empathic link, he acted in concert with the pilot, leaning to the left to help the Vyper swing more sharply as B'sainnad hauled it into a tight, ascending turn. Green lightning snarled past a heartbeat later, sending static crawling through Nuadhu's hair.

Ithalaris and Cualain had not returned. Their Vyper skimmed through the upper foliage beneath the Wild Riders, preceding a storm of broken branches and tattered leaves. The two Doom Scythes fell in behind it, slicing through the wake of arboreal debris.

'Come back!' Nuadhu demanded over the messenger-waves. The Vyper's course was diverging from the rest of the kindred, curving away back towards the river canyon. 'What are you doing?'

*'Get to safety, cousin-lord,'* Cualain replied while Ithalaris took the Vyper even closer to the whipping branches in an effort to mask them against the sensors of the pursuing necrontyr. *'Make sure the Ynnari gets back to her people with word of Clan Fireheart's loyalty and strength. Our family needs powerful allies.'*

Druthkhala slid her jetbike alongside Nuadhu, eyes fixed on the Vyper, following each jink and swoop an instant after B'sainnad acted.

*'We'll lose them in the canyon again, I promise,'* Cualain continued. Ithalaris steadied their course for just long enough for her gunner to fire another burst of scatter laser at the closing Doom Scythes. Scarlet energy sparked from the fuselage of one, but it did not slow nor change course. *'Come back for the prize!'*

Two other Doom Scythes came at the kindred from opposite sides, angled to catch them in a crossfire while three more drew ahead, accelerating towards the webway portal. Rather than continue the chase, the necrontyr had decided to cut them off from their goal.

Twin lances of lightning speared towards the Wild Riders. One bolt caught

Ythasda's jetbike on the tip of a slender stabiliser wing. Like a living creature, the crackle of green power crawled across the scarlet skin of the steed, turning everything it touched to scattering atoms, feeding on the energy released. A spark leapt to the rider, seeming to ignite Ythasda with a green storm, while another snapped across the air to Arnewan, striking her in the chest as she dipped below the faltering jetbike.

Ythasda's death-scream was short-lived, rider and steed disappearing into particles a couple of heartbeats later. Arnewan died in silence, his riderless jetbike plunging down into the forest to explode upon the canopy. The death-pangs resonated across the Wild Riders' spirit-bridge, ripping a sympathetic yell from Nuadhu. Coldness clutched his heart, swiftly replaced by a fiery rage. It was a near-physical agony to flee rather than fight. B'sainnad responded, but as he was about to ease the Vyper on a course towards the Doom Scythes overhauling them, the messenger bead within Nuadhu's ear quivered.

*'If we all die here, our clan dies too.'* The words of Caelledhin were like cool waters on the flames of his anger. *'You are the Wild Rider, free as the wind. But now you must be the clan heir, guide of your people, protector of your kin.'*

Nuadhu glanced below and saw that Cualain and Ithalaris were nowhere in sight – presumably they had reached the sanctuary of the river chasm. It was possible they had died, too far from the empathic link for him to have felt it, but he preferred to believe his first assessment.

There was nothing but open air between the Wild Riders and the webway, but a fresh salvo of living lightning scorched into the rising group. Dagdhel became a cloud of atomised matter drifting on the breeze.

'Full speed, no more tricks,' he called to the rest, slapping B'sainnad on the shoulder. 'At the last, with speed we shall be saved.'

No longer concerned with their evasive manoeuvres, the riders of Saim-Hann accelerated hard, unleashing the full power of their steeds' anti-gravitic engines. At B'sainnad's urging, *Alean* was like a mount unleashed after too much time corralled, almost throwing Nuadhu over the rail of his fighting platform. He gripped tight, looking into the drop towards the forest, laughter wrenched from the depths of his gut by the exhilaration of experience.

Beside him, Alyasa stood up from his saddle, a glittering rod in one hand. Nuadhu felt the surge of psychic energy when the windweaver reached out with his thoughts towards the portal. Nuadhu strained every fibre of body and thought, urging on his riders for the last effort.

Ahead, the three necrontyr craft slewed to a halt, sliding through the air as they

turned their weapons on the rapidly approaching riders. Nuadhu's chest was tight and his limbs trembled with suppressed emotion.

A scintillating white beam leapt from the closest Doom Scythe, passing behind Nuadhu. He saw nothing, but in the next heartbeat could no longer feel Alguinas among the kindred-thought. The loss choked him, the thought of his cousin's vaporised spirit stone trapping the breath in his throat.

Desperation clouded the psychic link like a fog of despair, dragging at Nuadhu's mind. He fixed upon the webway, eyes and thoughts locked to the swirl of purple as the symbol of life itself. He thought he saw the coils of the world spirit within the spiralling energy, a gate to Saim-Hann.

Guided by him, the kindred set their minds to the goal. Of single purpose, their psychic potential throbbed within their union. Nuadhu sensed the touch of Alyasa's thoughts, channelling the raw power, shaping it into a renewed entreaty to the webway. Mesmerised by the flow of emotional energy, each rider enmeshed in the temporarily shared spirit, Nuadhu was almost crippled by the jolt of Torasadha's abrupt end to a fresh necrontyr beam.

Fuelled by the mix of hope and despair, the portal spasmed. The insubstantial tunnel extended towards the windweaver's outstretched wand, becoming a scarlet serpent with open maw. Nuadhu needed to issue no command. As one, the Wild Riders dived into the cosmic serpent's gullet, finally reaching the sanctuary of the webway.

Turning to check on the others as they passed into the tunnel of Alyasa's delving, Nuadhu's elation became despair. Ten of his kin had made it back to the web portal, along with Druthkhala.

He had departed for Agarimethea to improve the standing of Clan Fireheart. Nuadhu had thought that the news of the tomb world's vault would be worth the price paid, but as he counted his family's losses, he knew that all he had brought back were tales of dead sons and daughters.

# CHAPTER 2

## BECOMING YNNARI

'Welcome aboard the *Ynnead's Dream,* Aradryan,' declared the Ynnari waiting for him at the bottom of the docking ramp.

She was garbed in a single piece of cloth that wrapped about her body many times, creating undulating folds of rainbow fabric. Her head was shaved bald, the near-white skin pierced with gem-headed needles and gilded rings. The rest of her visible flesh was unadorned, save for a crimson wristband on each arm denoting her allegiance to Ynnead. Aradryan immediately noted the lack of a spirit stone about her person – one of the drukhari, formerly of Commorragh.

Suddenly disturbed at the prospect of disembarking, Aradryan glanced back to Unsushueth. The Dire Avenger that had plucked him from certain death was divested of his armour and war mask. A smile of encouragement accompanied his reassuring nod. His youth had surprised Aradryan, who had thought the Ynnari would mostly be like him: of at least middling term of age, wearied by their experiences. The truth was that he had met no such thing as a 'typical' Ynnari on the journey from Sithonemesh, where he had joined the kindred of the Reborn. To encompass the breadth of ages, backgrounds and demeanours as one type was to dismiss the great diversity of all aeldari. From across the craftworlds and Commorragh, from outcast bands and pirate lairs, thousands had been drawn to the cause. There was even rumour that some Exodites had felt the Whisper and responded to the pull of Ynnead. Yet for all their disparate origins, those that Aradryan had spoken to had a singular fate that united them.

All sought something greater to serve than themselves. All had been possessed of a deep dissatisfaction, beyond even the ennui of a bored craftworlder or the mind-weary fatigue of paranoia for those living in the Dark City beneath the shadow of She Who Thirsts.

‘Are you not coming, friend?’ Aradryan asked, suspicious of the stranger that awaited them.

‘No, we berth upon the *Fires of Kirasujeth*,’ the warrior told him. ‘Tzibilakhu will look after you for the time being, until you are comfortably acquainted with our ways and routines.’

‘Do not be intimidated. The *Ynnead’s Dream* is a warship, but you will find peace, companionship and knowledge here also,’ said the Commorraghan. Her smile became a grin, though its welcoming properties were somewhat curtailed by the blood-red gems affixed to each tooth.

‘I am not intimidated by your ship,’ snapped Aradryan as he started down the long ramp. Behind him a grav-sled followed like an obedient pet, carrying his meagre belongings: his guardian armour and a few hygienic essentials he had been gifted by others on the short journey through the webway to the roving Ynnari fleet. The clothes he wore – a loose-fitting shirt and trousers in black and crimson – were likewise the result of charity, for he had left the battlefield on Sithonemesh with only his battlegear and one other possession. His hand moved to the pouch at his belt, reassuring him that the spirit stone of Diamedin still nestled within. It was probably a trick of imagination that it seemed to pulse warmly at his touch.

‘Do not think that because I came to you as a guardian of Alaitoc I have seen nothing of the galaxy,’ he continued when his slippered feet stepped upon the marble-like dockside, casting an appraising look over the large berthing hall, as if assessing its suitability to be his new quarters. ‘Your ship is an impressive vessel, I once commanded one very much like it. And the flotilla it led.’

Tzibilakhu looked suitably impressed, though it was impossible to know if she was feigning the reaction.

Except it was not impossible, Aradryan remembered. He let the Whisper flow through him, feeling the spirit of the Commorraghan.

‘That would not be wise,’ Tzibilakhu told him, growing serious. She raised an admonishing finger. ‘You are not yet ready to share the soul of another, and certainly not one that has lived as I have.’

Rebuffed, he let the Whisper fade, and shrugged to dismiss her complaint, and his embarrassment.

‘So what is your role here?’ he asked. ‘Chaperone? Valet? Are you to show me to my abode?’

She did not reply immediately. Her smile returned, mischievous but fleeting.

‘It was passed to us that you have some experience as a steer-thought. If you

commanded a ship, as you say, we might even find a vessel for you to captain.' She moved to stand alongside him and, with a gentle hand on his arm, encouraged him to start walking along the quayside. He glanced back to see that the dawnsail transport that had brought him had already withdrawn its boarding gantry and was floating away from the dock.

'I would…' He looked at her, wanting to start this phase of his life in trust, but cautious of the perils of familiarity that had brought him such pain in the past.

'I understand,' she said, stopping, turning both of them to face the departing ship. 'You wish to see the ship leave. To know for certain that you are here, one of the Ynnari, and to accept that there is no return to the life you once led.'

'That is remarkable insight for…' He trailed away, regretting the remark.

'For an Ynnari?'

'A Commorraghan,' he confessed.

'We are not renowned for our empathy,' she conceded. 'But I have travelled the journey you've only just started.'

Her nod directed his attention back to the departing transport, which raised silver moth wings as it slipped through the shimmer of the docking bay's force field. The undulating iridescence of the webway flashed along the ship's length for a few heartbeats and then the vessel turned and rose out of sight. A sigh escaped Aradryan and his shoulders slumped.

'I am not a servant,' Tzibilakhu told him as they continued towards the high archway at the end of the pier. 'There is no Path of Service here. No slaves or menials. We each stand together, and alone.'

'So how is it that you have come to see me off the transport?'

'I will be your mentor. One who has heard the Whisper for some time guides each of those newly called to Ynnead. As Yvraine showed us the power of the Whispering God, we now pass it on to others.'

'So you have been with the Ynnari for some time? I have come to realise that age is no guide, but you seem barely more than an adolescent to me.'

Her laugh was easy and warming, so genuinely full of humour that Aradryan could not stop himself from smiling at the sound.

'It is you that is the child to me,' she told him. They were almost at the gateway now, a ruddy-lit hallway beyond. 'Do you know the story of the *Lanathrialle*?'

'Only rumour,' replied Aradryan. 'It is said that among her many lives before becoming the Opener of the Way, Yvraine was a corsair captain, commander of the *Lanathrialle*, also known as the *Sword of Winter's Vengeance*.'

'I always liked that name. Alas, when Yvraine was forced to flee Commorragh

she came seeking the *Lanathrialle* to aid in her escape. Pursued by the ships of Asdrubael Vect, the starship was destroyed, sacrificed to give her time to evade the imminent wrath of the Kabal of the Dark Heart. A sacrifice made with great loss but no regret. Even after that time her crew still adored her, you see.'

'That is quite a claim on Yvraine's behalf. None can know for sure.'

'Except that I can, for I was captain of the *Lanathrialle* when Yvraine returned to us, and chief navigator when I served under her.'

Aradryan stopped and stared at Tzibilakhu, shocked at such a blatant falsehood.

'You? No, impossible. That would make you at least twice as old as I am, if you served as you say.'

Tzibilakhu fixed him with a stare, her humour now gone.

'You must rid yourself of these prejudices and self-delusions if you are to foster the power of the Whisper. I cannot say that you will not face deception and self-interest among the Ynnari, but you should not come to expect it. We are united in our belief in Yvraine, and in our service to the God of the Dead. I gain nothing from lying to you. I was captain of the *Lanathrialle* and it was my command that drove it into a webway portal too small for it to pass, blocking all pursuit, killing hundreds of my crew and dooming the rest to despicable ends at the hands of Vect's torturers and his haemonculi allies. I and only a handful of my closest crew escaped with Yvraine.' She stroked the back of her hand across her smooth cheek. 'You would be surprised at the rejuvenating properties of a lifetime spent drinking souls kept in agony and despair.'

Aradryan shuddered, reminded of the diabolic nature of drukhari existence.

'Do you still…?' He hardly dared ask the question.

'Not out of preference,' she replied. 'But you will learn more of that as I teach you about the Whisper and the forces it can channel. Before then, we shall get you settled and then we shall see Yvraine.'

'Yvraine?' He did not think he could be more startled. 'What do you mean we will see her?'

'When time permits, she grants audience to every new soul drawn to Ynnead. We have time now.' She laid a hand on his shoulder and he noticed for the first time her fingernails had been replaced with sharpened slivers of red crystal. He cringed away at the thought of the blades so close to the blood vessels in his throat.

'Tell me, on which ship did you serve? What was the name of this corsair fleet that called you admiral?'

'The *Fae Taruth*,' he told her as they resumed their journey. It had been a long

time since he had named the ship and it brought back a flood of recollection, little of it as pleasant or glorious as he had thought at the time. ‘My fleet was known as the Azure Flame. We ran from the Golden Gate to the Winter Gulf, terror of the aliens.’

‘No,’ said Tzibilakhu, shaking her head. ‘I have not heard of them.’

Aradryan told himself that it did not matter, that it was better that his period of shame was left in the past. Yet he could not fight a small resentment, and wished that he could enjoy just a little notoriety from those dark times.

Nuadhu’s starship, the webrunner *Eltereth*, slid into place alongside his clan’s boarding pilaster in the forward docking spars of Saim-Hann. The neighbouring towers were lightless, devoid of activity where once they had bustled with the affairs of Clan Fireheart. Two other starships sat dormant at their quay-pillars, all that remained of a flotilla that had once numbered more than a dozen.

The mood of the Wild Riders was understandably sombre as they disembarked onto the pale stone dockside, the alighting hall humming with the noise of anti-grav engines. In solemn procession, they glided down the *Eltereth*’s ramp, their bright banners removed, sashes of white – the aeldari colour of death – laid upon the sleek noses of their craft.

Nuadhu led them atop *Alean*, jaw clenched as tightly as his fingers gripped the rail of his fighting platform. Caelledhin followed, and the others in order arranged by their relationship to the clan heir. Druthkhala did not join them, but waited in the bay of the starship. Nuadhu hoped it was out of respect for their observances for the dead, but with the Commorraghan he was not sure of her motivations. He had avoided her on the journey home, not wishing to confuse his grief with thoughts of her. To feel as the ancients had felt, that was the Wild Rider creed – whether to sadness or anger, laughter or lust – but there were only so many emotions one could handle at a time, and he had fled the one extremity to wallow in another for a while.

B’sainnad stopped just beside the arch that led into the tower’s interior, allowing Nuadhu to vault down from the Vyper. Caelledhin pulled over her jetbike on the opposite side of the gold-wreathed gateway, her eyes downcast.

One by one the Wild Riders flowed past, heads bowed, one hand upon the spirit stone mounted above the heart. It took a painfully short time for them all to depart, leaving Nuadhu with Caelledhin. Still his half-sister did not look at him, head turned away.

The growl of a different engine timbre drew his gaze to the approach of

Druthkhala. She stopped a short distance away and sat up straight in the saddle of her reaver-bike, arms crossed.

'Your losses are not in vain, Fireheart,' she told him. 'I will send word to Yvraine of what we have uncovered on Agarimethea.'

'And what will she do?' Caelledhin snapped suddenly, face flushed, eyes rimmed with the red of long weeping. 'Mistress of the dead, shall she conjure our fallen back from the embrace of Ynnead?'

'The necrontyr will have no interest in their spirit stones,' replied the Commorraghan. 'The artifice of the soul is anathema to their thinking. Your dead can be recovered.'

'What will Yvraine do?' Nuadhu asked. 'Will she travel to Agarimethea, will she come to Saim-Hann?' He really wanted to know if Druthkhala would be staying for much longer but avoided the question.

'I cannot guess her mind,' admitted the Bloodbride. 'Many are her concerns, and more still the voices that clamour for her attention.'

'But you promised support for Clan Fireheart…'

'Support?' Druthkhala frowned. 'The Ynnari do not like to meddle in the politics of individual craftworlds.'

'You said that we would be friends of the Ynnari.'

'Your recollection is flawed. No promise was made. The friendship of Yvraine is… uncertain. There are many that actively seek to avoid it. We are the Reborn, servants of Ynnead, messengers of the dead. It is often unwise to court our company.'

Nuadhu was not sure if she meant it as such, but he took her last words to be a more specific warning rather than a general one.

'Some things are worth a little risk,' he told her.

Caelledhin snorted her derision, but Druthkhala rewarded him with a lopsided smile.

'I shall bring word of Yvraine's intent to the council, if you would call the leaders to attend.'

'I do not have that authority,' confessed Nuadhu. The reminder was a twist of the knife that pierced his heart. 'Only my father can call the council on behalf of Clan Fireheart. But I am sure they would wish to listen to the emissary of Yvraine as they did before.'

His gaze slid to his half-sister, meeting her scowl with an innocent smile.

'Perhaps if you spoke–'

'No! You will see father first, and it will be from your lips that he will hear the

names of the nephews and nieces he will not see again.'

With a last venomous glare for Druthkhala, Caelledhin sped beneath the arch, leaving Nuadhu alone with the Commorraghan. He was about to invite her to the Clan Fireheart palaces in the Flameglades but she gunned the engine of her steed and shot after Caelledhin, the wind of her passage buffeting Nuadhu as she raced away.

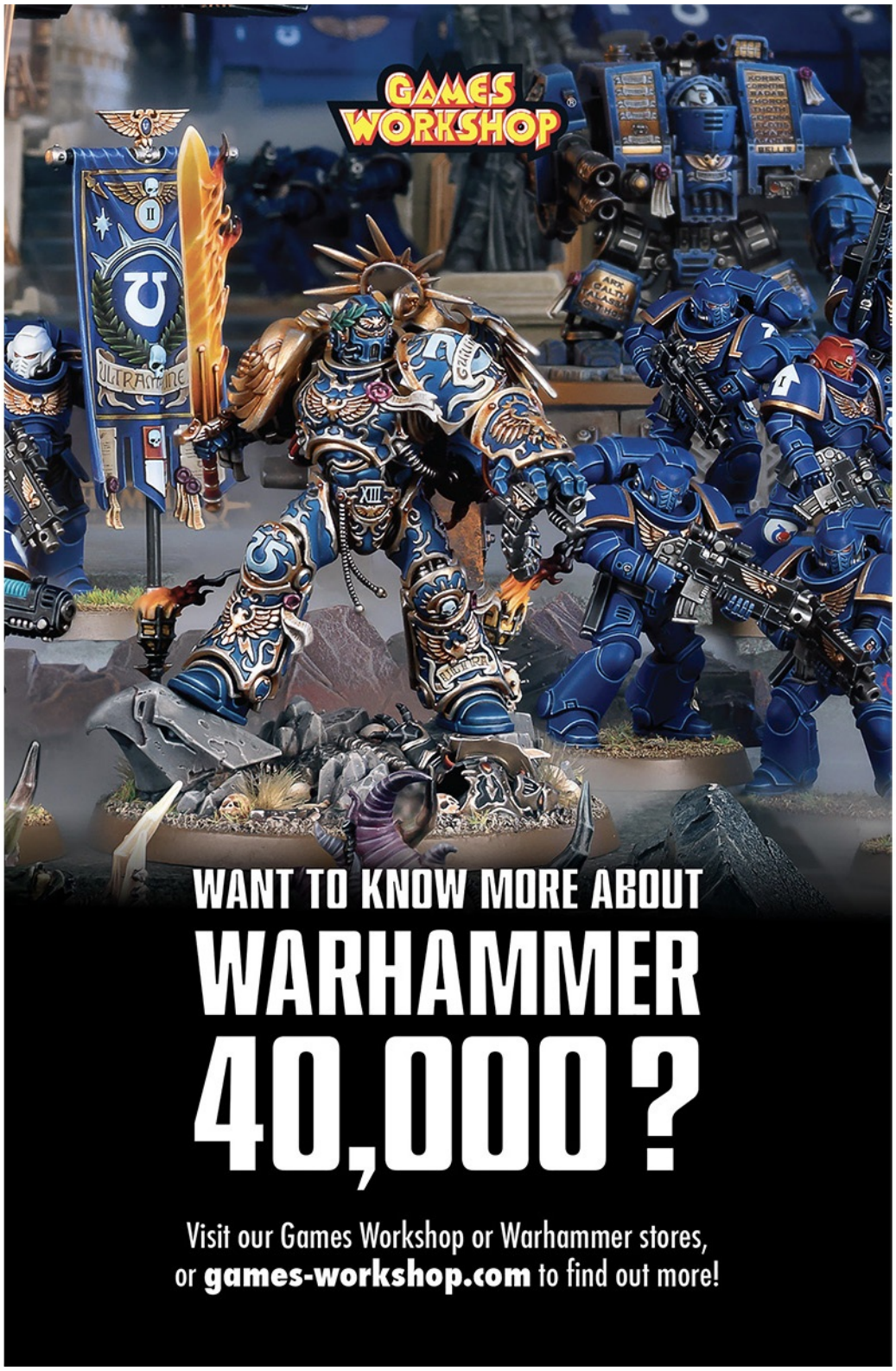
Alone, leaning heavily on Drake's Fang as though wearied by long toil, Nuadhu considered his immediate future. He sighed heavily and shook his head, not sure which of the surviving gods he had offended to deserve such a destiny.

**Click here to buy *Rise of the Ynnari: Wild Rider*.**

# THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

**Sign up today for updates on the latest Black Library news and releases**

SIGN UP NOW


GAMES WORKSHOP
ULTRAMARINE
WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT
WARHAMMER
40,000?
Visit our Games Workshop or Warhammer stores,
or games-workshop.com to find out more!

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

*The Purging of Kadillus* first published in 2010.
*Angels of Darkness* first published in 2008.
*Azrael* first published in 2016.
This eBook edition published in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Lie Setiawan.

Knights of Caliban © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2019. Knights of Caliban, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.
All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78030-780-0

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at
blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at
games-workshop.com

**eBook license**

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom ("Black Library"); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website ("You/you/Your/your")

(jointly, "the parties")

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book ("e-book") from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

  o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

  o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

  o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

  o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in 'seeding' or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

- o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;
- o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.