



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# DEATHWATCH

STEVE PARKER



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# DEATHWATCH

STEVE PARKER

**A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL**

# DEATHWATCH

**STEVE PARKER**



BLACK LIBRARY

# WARHAMMER 40,000

IT IS THE 41ST MILLENNIUM. FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED CENTURIES THE EMPEROR HAS SAT IMMOBILE ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF EARTH. HE IS THE MASTER OF MANKIND BY THE WILL OF THE GODS, AND MASTER OF A MILLION WORLDS BY THE MIGHT OF HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE ARMIES. HE IS A ROTTING CARCASS WRITHING INVISIBLY WITH POWER FROM THE DARK AGE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE IS THE CARRION LORD OF THE IMPERIUM FOR WHOM A THOUSAND SOULS ARE SACRIFICED EVERY DAY, SO THAT HE MAY NEVER TRULY DIE.

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS - AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE. THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.

## PROLOGUE

The tunnels were alive with them. The ceilings, walls, the floor; everywhere a tide of tooth and claw, of alien organisms cloaked in shadow, slaving and chittering with lethal intent as they swept towards the trespassers.

Insatiable.

Unstoppable.

They surged forwards, unified in purpose, compelled by a single terrible will, a cold intelligence that drove them on from much deeper and lower in this inky maze of twists and turns. The command was given in no language of sounds; it was a single, all-powerful impulse untranslatable to the human mind. The closest approximation would have been *Kill!*

But *kill* was too simple a word for this, an act so fundamental to the aliens' life-cycle, to the cancerous spread of their merciless race across all known space. The impulse reflected a complete cycle of purpose, of experience, of need:

Kill. Consume. Utilise. Adapt. Grow. Spread. Kill.

So it would go, on and on, until the universe held nothing left to devour.

Unless, of course, that cancer was cut out, excised with precision and lethal violence.

Three stood facing the xenos horde; three warriors, unafraid, heavily armed and clad in ceramite armour. Space Marines. The living legacy of the Emperor Himself. But what could three hope to do? They were almost certain to be overwhelmed here in the claustrophobic darkness. The numbers they faced were beyond count... And yet, they did not fear.

*Kill* was the thought in their minds, too – as much a part of their life-cycle as that of the ravening foe they faced.

Muzzle flare from two bolters strobed the tunnel intersection. The air beat with a deep tattoo, bolt after bolt after bolt. Chitinous ribcages shattered. Blood sprayed in dark fonts from punctured heads and torsos. Bodies burst from within as large-calibre rounds detonated deep inside alien flesh.

To the three, nothing felt so right as this killing of foes. They had been conditioned to it, programmed to live for it. It was hard-coded into every neuron. More than mere duty, it was a reason to live, the crux of their entire existence, the expression of everything they were and ever would be. Every enemy slain

lifted them higher. Every mangled corpse that hit the ground pushed them that bit closer to the ceiling of their performance levels. Not a single bolt missed its mark, every shot a kill-shot.

Even so, it would not be enough.

‘A curse on you, Karras,’ hissed Ignacio Solarion under his breath. Two menacing shapes, humanoid but far from human, sped towards him, trying to flank him from the shadows to his left. He downed them without hesitation, a bolter-round to each brain. Over the vox-link, he barked at the others, ‘We can’t hold here waiting for those two fools. Not now. Fall back to RP2[1]!’

His bolter chugged to a sudden stop. With reflexes honed over a century of warfare, he dumped the empty mag and hammered home another just in time. Something on the ceiling reached bony arms towards him. Solarion didn’t need to look up. Prox-alerts on his retinal display told him it was there. He turned the fat muzzle of his bolter straight upwards, fired and stepped back a pace.

A scream. A spray of hot blood. Something long-limbed and heavy crashed to the tunnel floor where he had stood. Solarion raised an armoured boot and stamped down hard, smashing the grotesque head flat on the tunnel floor. The body quivered and twitched as its nerves fired off one last time. No chance to admire his handiwork. Other targets were closing at speed. He marked each by distance – so few metres! – and dropped them as they came.

Bolt after bolt after bolt.

‘We fall back *now*, brothers, or we die here for naught!’ he growled.

‘Stand and fight, Ultramarine,’ another rumbled back at him. The voice belonged to Maximion Voss, battle-brother of the Imperial Fists. ‘Scholar will be here. I know it. Watcher, too. Give them a damned chance.’

‘It’s *our* chances that concern me!’ Solarion shot back.

Five metres to the Ultramarine’s left, there was a sudden blinding wash of white light. Voss had fired again. The flamer he carried sent out a torrent of ignited promethium that washed over the ranks of the charging foe, filling the tunnel with blazing, screeching bodies that thrashed and danced as they burned. In the close confines of the tunnels, the weapon was supremely effective... At least while its ammo lasted.

Voss dumped another depleted canister from under the flamer’s neck, tugged a replacement from his webbing, and pressed it into place till it clicked in its housing. *Two tanks left.* He knew it wouldn’t be enough – not if the others failed to link up with them soon. Galling as it was, Voss knew the Ultramarine was right. They had to fall back while they still had firepower enough to cover their

retreat.

Throne, how he hated that word!

He spat a curse in Low Gothic – so much better for swearing than the higher tongue.

‘Fine,’ he told Solarion. ‘Lead us out. Paper-face and I will keep the bastards off our backs.’

‘I’m almost out,’ added Siefer Zeed, third member of the embattled trio. ‘Prophet! Throw me a magazine.’

*Prophet!*

Solarion scowled under his helm. The Raven Guard was a disrespectful fool, irreverent beyond any other Space Marine he had ever encountered.

Nevertheless, between shots, he tossed Zeed a full bolter-mag, then turned and broke from the fight. At an armour-heavy trot, he led them westwards up the long, winding tunnel towards RP2 and the supply cache they had left there. Ammunition... More of it at RP1. They’d need that too, no doubt. And farther still, awaiting them at the exfil point, the sixth member of Talon Squad. That thought almost brought a smile to Solarion’s narrow lips. The foul xenos would soon regret giving chase. Chyron would bring a storm of slaughter down upon them. It would be a fine sight, if any of them lived to see it.

Twenty metres up the tunnel, he turned to make sure the others were following and to give a burst of covering fire. Neither of the others could be trusted to fall back in the face of a fight. They were reckless and arrogant. They lacked proper battlefield discipline. It was a miracle they’d survived this long. That was why Solarion should have been chosen. Ultramarines fought smart, not just hard. He should have been made Alpha. Sigma would rue the day he let the bloody Death Spectre run this fiasco.

Voss and Zeed *were* following, however, walking backwards towards him but unable to move at speed while they held the enemy off. There was another blinding gush of white flame from Voss’s weapon. It bought twenty metres of respite – a few seconds of breathing space only. Fresh pursuers would pour unflinching over the burning bodies of their dead.

‘Run, fools!’ shouted Solarion, and he dropped into a half-crouch with his bolter braced between breastplate and pauldron. More alien shapes appeared, moving into the space Voss had just cleared, their ropey muscles and glistening organic armour detailed in the flames that guttered on the bodies of their dead broodmates.

Solarion was about to pull his trigger and down the first when the tunnel wall

on his immediate right exploded outwards. He was hammered against the far wall by the force of the blast, his armour pummelled by the impacts of countless fist-sized rocks. Scraped and dented, he rose from his knees with a half-stumble, shaking white stars from his vision. Thick dust obscured everything around him. His helmet optics buzzed with intermittent static. Warning glyphs flashed red. The vox-link hissed in his ear. He thought he heard shouting and bolter-fire.

Something monstrous reared up out of the dust cloud in front of him, serpentine and segmented from what little he could see.

The walls trembled with its unearthly battle-scream, high and shrill, and yet deep and throaty too, as if it screamed with two voices.

Huge clashing jaws swung towards Solarion, scything through the air, questing for prey.

‘I’ll give you something to scream about,’ snarled the Ultramarine.

He raised his bolter and opened fire.

# DEATHWATCH

ACT I: THE CALL

*'How arrogant we were before His coming, and how naïve. The structures we trusted to maintain our unity were so fragile. Too fragile by far. We lost ourselves out there. We became strangers. We set off down different evolutionary paths. No wonder we faltered. No wonder we turned against each other. Had He not come to us then, chasing the shadows from the dark and the haze from our memories, we would have perished en masse, waging war against kin, not recognising each other, any difference seized upon as fuel for the fires of hate.*

*'He reminded us all that we were human, and He showed us that together, only together, could we endure the endless onslaught of those that were not.'*

– Inscription at Bilahl (anon.), circa. 800.M31

# 1

Darkness, sudden and absolute, swallowed everything, even the noise of a fully staffed bridge. The crew fell silent all at once as if plunged into a vacuum. And silent it might have stayed but for Captain Sythero, his voice cutting through the blackness like a cracked whip.

‘Mister Brindle!’ he barked.

‘Aye, sir,’ came the reply about ten metres off to the left in that utter dark.

‘I’d very much like to know what the hell is going on with my bloody ship! Back-up systems. Where are they? I want some light in here, and I want it now!’

As if the ship itself were listening, the bridge was suddenly painted in the red of emergency lighting. Everything reappeared, but dull, murky, revealed in hues of blood. The banks of monitor screens, however – both the captain’s huge personal screens and those in the bridge control pits – remained as black and lifeless as space.

Crewmen at ancient metal consoles began desperately tapping on their runeboards, trying to get any kind of response from the *Ventria*’s primary systems.

Nothing.

First Officer Gideon Brindle hunched forwards over the screen of a secondary systems monitor which had finally flickered to life. ‘Looks like we have full bio-support, sir,’ he told the captain. ‘Secondary and tertiary power units have kicked in for the air-scrubbers, waste reclamation, emergency lighting, shipboard communications, system resource monitors and door controls on all levels. No primary systems whatsoever.’

Brindle let that sink in for a moment before adding, ‘I don’t know how or why, sir, but we’re locked out.’

Sythero hammered a fist on the ornate armrest of his command throne. ‘Saints’ balls! Do we at least have local space comms? Can we contact the *Ultrix* or GDC[2]?’

In the gloomy red light, the captain saw his first officer cross to the comms pit and confer with the men and women there. His body language gave the answer away before he voiced it.

*No comms! What in Terra’s name is going on here? Are we being jammed? Are*

*we under attack?*

‘Orders, sir?’ asked the first officer.

Sythero was stumped. What could he do without engines and weapons? If there were enemies out there... Damn it, the auspex arrays were as dead as everything else.

‘No motive power at all, are we absolutely sure of that, Mister Brindle?’

‘None, sir. We’ve been frozen out of all engine systems and subsystems. We’re sitting dead in the water.’

‘I want observers at every viewport on this ship. I want eyes on anything that moves out there. Jump to it!’

Brindle was about to do exactly that when there was a sudden, ear-splitting burst of static over the ship’s vox-speaker system. The monitors stuttered and rolled back to life, displaying not their usual scrolling columns of glyphs and pict-feeds, but a lone icon in razor-sharp detail. It was a leering white skull overlaid on a pillar of deep red.

*No, not a pillar. A letter from the Gothic alphabet.*

Captain Sythero squinted at it, puzzled, angry and deeply unsettled.

An eerie voice accompanied the image: flat, cold, emotionless and inhumanly deep. To those listening, it seemed the voice of some great and terrible entity, a being to which they might seem little more than worms or ants.

And so it was.

‘Bow down before the glory of the God-Emperor and his most trusted agents,’ throbbed the voice. ‘Your ship’s primary systems have been disabled on the authority of His Majesty’s Holy Inquisition. This is a Centaurus level override. Do not attempt to circumvent it. You cannot. Do nothing. Say nothing. All systems will be restored in due course. Until then, know that we are watching you. That is all.’

The crew gaped at the wall-mounted vox-speakers in stunned silence.

‘Your ruddy arse that’s all!’ roared Captain Sythero, leaping up from his throne. ‘Brindle, open me a channel with that bastard right now!’

Brindle crossed hurriedly to his captain’s side, wringing his hands anxiously. He leaned close and spoke low so that the others would not hear. ‘With respect, sir, we had better sit tight. Whatever business they’re about, let them get on with it. We ought to just keep our heads down.’

Sythero glared at his first officer. Brindle was no coward, he knew. He’d never had cause for complaint till now. But the man was barely fighting tremors. Fear was written all over his face. What had gotten into him?

‘Listen, Gideon,’ said Sythero in more conversational tones, using Brindle’s first name in the hope of re-instilling a little of the man’s usual confidence. ‘I’ve got a crew of four hundred listed men here, and we’re floating in space at the absolute mercy of anyone or anything that shows up. I’ve been charged with protecting that bloody rock out there, all the Imperial resources on it, not to mention about three million people. So, I don’t care if the Emperor Himself shows up and asks me to wait it out. I want some bloody answers.’

Brindle nodded sympathetically, but spoke again, his eyes pleading. ‘I’ve heard a lot of stories in my time, sir. And I’ve shared more than a few with your good self at table, not so? But have you ever heard me talk of the Inquisition, sir? Can you remember even one occasion?’

Sythero simply scowled, wishing his first officer would get to the point.

‘That’s because there are none, sir. Every sailor talks when the booze is flowing. Talk of every horror known to man and then some. Traitors, witches, heretics, ghosts, xenos, you name it. But I tell you this, sir. You’ll never hear a word spoken about the Inquisition. Not a whisper, sir.’ Brindle paused to swallow in a throat gone dry. ‘You know why that is, captain? The people with those stories... They don’t live long enough to tell them.’

The captain raised a dubious eyebrow. He would have scorned anyone else for such talk – tall tales of shadowy conspiracy seemed to be a favourite pastime among the Navy’s lower ranks – but this was Gideon Brindle. The man was his rock. He never drank on duty. He could quote core Naval texts back to you verbatim if you asked, even when bone-tired. And right now, he was scared.

Captain Sythero had heard of the Inquisition, of course. He was an officer of thirty years’ experience, not some pup fresh from the academy. The name had cropped up now and then in war rooms and briefings. But he had always considered them just another arm of the Adeptus Terra, and a small one at that. Weren’t they mostly responsible for dealing with obscure religious matters? Something like that. As far as he knew, he had never run into them before.

Well, now he had, and somehow they had shut down his ship.

He folded his arms and stared out over his command bridge. The eyes of every crewman in that great long room had turned his way. He blew out a deep, frustrated breath, drew in another, and called out, ‘Stand down all of you. It’s not like we have any choice. Permission granted to rest at your stations until further notice. Mister Korren and Mister Hayter, stations six and ten. I’ll want to know the moment something changes.’

Two grudging *yessirs* came back at him. The captain had never liked Korren

and Hayter much, and he was not above demonstrating it.

He dropped back into his chair and rested his chin on a clenched fist. Brindle still stood beside him. The captain waved him off, gesturing for him to go and rest at his station. The first officer moved away. Before he had gone five metres, however, Captain Sythero called out to him again.

‘Inquisitors are just men, Gideon,’ he said. ‘Just men and women like you or I.’

Brindle turned, but his eyes did not meet his captain’s. They rested on that macabre icon still glowing from the nearest screen.

‘I don’t think so, sir,’ he said. ‘I don’t think they’re like us at all. But if we’re lucky, we’ll never find out the truth of it.’

Those words hung in the red gloom long after Brindle had returned to his chair. Captain Sythero turned them over and over in his head. Commanding a system defence ship, even all the way out here on the fringe, had always given him a sense of power, of importance. Four hundred trained men and women under his command. Forward weapons batteries that could level a city in minutes or cut through a battleship three times the *Ventria*’s size. How easily this Inquisition had come along and stripped him of that, ripped it away from him like a gossamer veil.

How had they shut him down? A Centaurus level override, the voice had said. Did that mean override codes had been pre-written into the ship’s systems? The *Ventria* was a vessel of His Holy Majesty’s Imperial Navy; it didn’t seem possible. But if the overrides had been broadcast from an external source, a ship somewhere in-system, why hadn’t the long-range auspex arrays picked it up? They had full-scan capabilities right out to the system’s edge and beyond.

If the override codes had been broadcast from another ship, the implications of them falling into enemy hands were, frankly, terrifying.

*I can’t abide this. Naval Command needs to be told. This undermines every capability we have. To hell with the warnings. As soon as the override lifts...*

Four hours and twenty-seven minutes later, it did lift. The *Ventria*’s primary systems came back online. Colours other than red flooded the bridge as if erasing a murder scene, restoring life, noise and activity. Cogitator screens and vocaliser units started churning out status reports and statistical data. The control pits buzzed in a frenzy.

Sythero thrust forwards in his chair and called out, ‘Brindle, open me a two-way with the *Ultrix*. I want to speak to Captain Mendel at once. And make sure

it's bloody secure.'

'Aye, sir,' said Brindle, punching the relevant runes.

A pale-skinned old man in a crisp Naval uniform soon appeared on the main display above Sythero's chair. He was clean shaven, with craggy features, and his white hair was oiled back smartly. A dark scar, legacy of a past wound, traced a path from his forehead down to his left ear. This was Mendel, captain of the *Ventria's* sister vessel, and Sythero read on his face that the old man had known this call was coming. Typically a forceful and vigorous man despite his years, Mendel looked unusually weary now. There was no formal greeting. The old man simply held up a hand and said, 'Please, captain. If you're about to ask what I think—'

Sythero cut him off. 'Tell me the *Ultrix* hasn't just spent the last four hours in some kind of blasted lockdown!'

Mendel sighed and nodded. 'We just got all our primaries back online, same as you.'

'And that's all you've got to say about it? For Throne's sake, Mendel. What's going on here? Someone out there has override codes that leave two Naval warships completely defenceless, and you don't seem ready to do a damned thing about it. We could have been cut to pieces already. What's gotten into you, man?'

Mendel looked off to the side, gave an order to someone on his own bridge, and returned his attention to the link. 'You saw the insignia, same as I did, captain, and we only saw *that* because they wanted us to know we were not under attack. It was a courtesy. I'm not about to start asking questions to which I honestly don't want the answers. And trust me, you don't either. Do us both a favour and forget anything happened.'

'Like red hell I will! I'm going straight to Sector Command with this. The implications—'

'The implications don't bear thinking about, son,' interrupted Mendel. 'I'll assume you like breathing as much as I do, so I'll say this and then I'm done. I hope you'll credit me with at least a little age-based wisdom. Drop this thing completely, captain. Don't mention it in any reports. Don't record it in your log. If anyone ever asks, it was a glitch in the monitoring scripts. Nothing more. That's your story, and you stick to it.'

Sythero knew his expression betrayed his distaste, but it was clear, too, that he was alone in wanting to take the matter further. As is so often true, the resolve of a man standing alone is that much easier to shake. He cursed under his breath,

wanting to do something, but not quite adamant enough to act against such strong counsel. Mendel and Brindle were neither of them fools, after all.

‘If it happens again?’ he asked the older captain, his tone signalling his acceptance of defeat.

‘We stay nice and quiet, and wait it out,’ replied Mendel. ‘I’ve worked system defence for a dozen other worlds, captain, and I’ve only ever... Look, I doubt it’ll happen again, but if it does...’ He shrugged.

Sythero nodded, hardly satisfied but subdued at last. ‘Very well, captain. In that case, I’ll not keep you any longer.’

Mendel gave a sympathetic half-smile and signed off.

Sythero remained staring silently at the comms monitor long after it had gone blank. In the days that followed, the numerous duties of a Naval captain helped to push the matter further and further towards the back of his mind. But he never quite forgot it. From time to time, his mind would throw up the image of the skull-and-I symbol that had appeared on all his screens, and he would wonder at it, at the power it represented and the questions no one else seemed willing to ask.

Of the men he had ordered to the ship’s viewports, only one reported anything unusual. Two hours and thirty-three minutes into the primary systems lock-out, Ormond Greeves, a low-ranking weapons tech assigned to one of the aft plasma-batteries, reported a brief flicker of fire skirting the edge of the dark hemisphere of the planet below. It looked, he said, as if something – perhaps a small craft, perhaps just debris – had entered the atmosphere of Chiaro at speed. Greeves had good eyes – he was a religious man, too, whose words were seldom, if ever, false. But his report was never entered in the ship’s records.

Of what really happened that day in the orbit of the mine-world Chiaro, only those responsible could properly tell. But they were of the Holy Inquisition and, with but a single exception, they were answerable to no one.

## 2

‘*Blackseed* has been planted,’ said one hooded figure to another in a clear, toneless voice.

They sat across from each other at a table of polished wood, rich and dark, the grain unnaturally symmetrical. No Imperial iconography here. It was a simple room, lit by simple oil lamps with simple iron fixings. There were no glasses or dishes on the table, no tapestries or portraits on the walls. No need for such. This place, after all, and everything in it, was mere psychic projection. The figures, too, were projections only, in truth seated many light years away from each other, brought together by the life-sapping toil of the psychic choirs under their command. Nothing here was real save the words they shared and the wills behind them. Here in this mutual mindscape, no other could intrude without detection. No other could hear their words, for they were spoken in secrecy. And that was well.

‘Fruition?’ asked the other.

‘Four years for a ten per cent conversion, given the reported gestation times. Nineteen years absolute if the magos’s projections prove accurate. Monitors are in place, naturally, but if there are timeline problems...’

‘You’ll have the new assets you need. The Watch Commander may grudge it, but he will not refuse. The new accord bears your personal seal as arranged. The Deathwatch knows what it gains. You have other assets in place, of course.’

‘Some of my best, and I’m positioning others now.’

‘Nothing to which you are too attached, I hope.’

‘You taught me better than that.’

A nod, acknowledging the compliment. ‘You do me credit as ever. May it always be so. If *Project Blackseed* bears fruit, your most fervent hope may be that much closer to reality.’

‘Or it may not. In either case, your continued support—’

‘Mutually beneficial, my old friend, as I’ve assured you before.’

‘Even so, I would affirm my commitment once more if you would hear it.’

A raised hand. ‘Your loyalty is not in doubt. We both know the sacrifices that must be made. Let the opposition believe you work against me. Small wounds I gladly bear for the greater prize. You have done well in laying false tracks. They

follow where we send them. They shall not discover their error until it is too late. By then we will have taken them apart from the inside, and our benefactor will rise to power unopposed.'

'You mentioned new players.'

'Middle-rankers. Nothing that need concern you yet. They play the long game, as we do, hoping to establish their own candidate. Others who share our *outlook* are already on hand to check them. Focus on your own immediate objectives. If there is anything you would ask before we part minds...'

'Is she well?'

*Always the same question, worded exactly the same way. His one true weakness.*

*His sister.*

'She sleeps peacefully as always, my friend. Envy her that. And may the Imperium to which you restore her be a better place for both of you.'

'*Blackseed* will bear fruit.'

'But only if White Phoenix is at the centre. Any other and we gain nothing. The psykers were adamant. Along that path alone lies the weapon we need.'

'White Phoenix will be ordered to the relevant location when the time is right. Everything else will depend on successful extraction. I am sure the Deathwatch will not disappoint.'

'Let us hope not. The visions were less clear on that count. In any case, I shall await your report. We'll not speak again until this is over. Vigilance, my friend. *In nomine Imperator.*'

'Vigilance. And may His Glorious Light guide us all.'

### 3

Around him, death. Familiar. Comfortable. Not the screaming, churning, blood-drenched death of thousands falling in battle. This was quiet death. This was the pensive, sombre death of the graveyard in winter. This was death carved artfully in stone. Death in repose.

A crow cawed in the chill air, noisily protesting the intrusion of the tall figure in grey fatigues who approached uninvited.

Lyandro Karras grinned at the bird and nodded in salutation, but as he drew nearer, the bird cawed once more, a last harsh reproach, and left its perch on the tallest of the headstones. Pinions clapping, it beat a path through the frigid air.

Karras watched the crow's grudging departure until it vanished beyond a steep hill to his right. Falling snow danced for a moment in the wake of its passage.

*We are both icons of death, my noisy friend*, he thought, psychically tracking the bird's life-force as it moved farther and farther off, something he did out of long habit.

*I precipitate it. My arrival signals the coming end. You come after to gorge on the spoils. And neither of us is welcome in gentle company. How misunderstood we are!*

The words were not his own but quotes from a 31st millennium play by Herten. *Sunset on Deneb*, it was called. Karras had never seen it performed, but he had read it once during warp transit to a combat zone in the Janos subsector. That had been over a century ago. Thinking back, he allowed himself a moment of silent amusement as he remembered the improbable series of events that had befallen the play's hero, Benizzi Caldori. Stumbling from conflict to conflict, the poor fool, unable even to tie his own boot-laces, had ended up a Lord Militant charged with winning a sector-wide campaign against the abhorrent orks.

Karras made a mental note to recall the play in its entirety sometime. There were several lessons in the second and third acts worth reviewing.

Turning his thoughts away from petulant crows and ancient plays, he continued his journey, snow crunching beneath his boots with every broad stride. He walked without destination, as he had done for the past three days, untroubled by sub-zero temperatures that would have killed a normal man, glad simply to have been called back here after so long fighting out in the dark

reaches.

Occludus.

The grave world.

Chapter-planet of the Death Spectres Space Marines.

*Home.*

As he walked, Karras let his fingers run over the snow-covered tops of the headstones he passed. History could not recall the people who had made them, nor those who lay beneath, though they were certainly human. The writing on the stones was in a sharp, angular script that had lost all its meaning far back in the mists of time. Despite the Chapter's efforts, no record could be found that told of the first colonies here. No archive explained how or why the entire planet had been dedicated to the interring of the dead.

*And this world's greatest secret...*

That was a thing the Chapter kept well buried, for there were still things in the universe that mankind was far from ready to know.

Thinking of this and of the long-dead multitude beneath his feet caused Karras to recall his own deaths.

The first he had experienced at the age of four S.I. [3], and it had lasted only twenty-three minutes and seven seconds. The poison they gave him stopped his heart and lungs – he'd had only one heart back then, and his lungs had as yet been unaltered. He remembered struggling frantically, unable to scream, his young muscles almost tearing as he wrestled with the restraints. Then the struggle left him and so did his worldly senses. His awareness awoke to the realms beyond reality. He had seen the nexus, the Black River of which others had spoken, its surface an inexplicable cylinder enclosing his mind, funnelling him towards the Beyond. He had felt its powerful currents pulling at him, dragging him towards an irreversible transition he was not yet ready to make.

In the lore of the Chapter, as it was written in ancient times, only those who died in battle could be reborn to serve again. The Afterworld waited to embrace him, to swallow him, to deny him that eventual rebirth, and he fought as his betters had instructed, using mantras, wielding his mental strength where the physical had no meaning. Other presences, hungry and malign, closed in on him as he resisted, but they could not breach the flowing walls of the tunnel. They belonged to other dimensions and lacked the power to tear their way into his. Nevertheless, he heard them screaming in rage and frustration. He felt it, too. Their combined anger manifested itself as a hurricane-like force, fearfully strong. He reeled as it buffeted his awareness. Still the Black River pulled at

him, but he held on.

How long had he fought in those strange dimensions? Time flowed differently there. Hours? Days? Longer? Bright as his young life-force was, his reserves reached their end at last. He was sapped. He could fight the flow no longer. There would be no return to the world of flesh. Not ever. He had failed himself and the Chapter both, and the price was an eternity without honour or glory.

*No! I cannot die. I must not die. Not like this, without weapon in hand.*

Thoughts of disappointing his *khadit*[\[4\]](#) were too much. That, too, was worse than death, a shame he refused to carry into the ever-after. Renewed strength infused his essence then, born of loyalty and natural tenacity both. He fought harder, a last desperate push, turning his rage upon the flowing nexus as if it were a sentient foe.

In the culmination of holy rites symbolic of the Great Resurrection itself, his immortal soul wrestled its way back to the physical plane. He gasped, flexed cold, stiff fingers, opened his eyes, and drank deep lungfuls of incense-heavy air. Lyandro Karras lived again, no longer an aspirant but a neophyte that day, embraced by the warrior cult that had taken him from his birth-parents and changed his fate to one of consequence.

*The Black River terrified me back then.*

As he crunched through the snow between avenues of ancient graves, he remembered his second death.

He had been eight S.I. – almost twenty-two Terran years – and he had lain dead for one hour, eleven minutes and twenty-eight seconds. Dispassionate eyes had watched him as he lay on an altar of black marble inlaid with fine golden script. Those around him, robed and hooded in dark grey, murmured ancient litanies in low, hypnotic monotone. Again, Karras had fought against the currents of the Black River as it surged all around him. Experience gave him more fortitude this time around, but his strengthened life-force and growing psychic power also attracted more attention from the dreadful denizens on the other side of the walls. He felt them clawing frantically at the fabric of reality, scrabbling to get at him. They had come so much closer that second time, driven into a famished frenzy by the new vigour they sensed in him. But, as before, he won out. Bolstered by mantras taught since the earliest days of the Chapter, and the Deep Training passed to him by his *khadit*, he bested death and its raging currents once more.

When life at last returned to his cooling corpse, Karras rose once again. And once again, he ascended in rank, a neophyte no longer, a full battle-brother of the

Chapter at last. The litanies ended. Silent smiles replaced thin-lipped concern. He stood now among equals, ready at last to visit death on mankind's enemies in the Emperor's holy name.

Karras remembered the look in the eyes of his khadit that day. *There* was the respect he craved. And beneath it, just for a fleeting second, something like the glimmer of an almost parental pride.

The third and final time Karras had died during the sacred rites of the Chapter, he was one hundred and nine years-old by the Terran count, and he lay as a corpse for a full Occludian day<sup>[5]</sup>. It was the greatest test he had faced thus far – a test which, this time, he undertook at his own behest. Success would elevate him within the Librarius, unlocking a path to greater psychic mastery that was, by grim necessity, closed to those of Lexicanium rank. If he survived, he would return to life as a Codicier, proud to stand among the most powerful of his psychic brethren. Only the most darkly blessed ever attempted the Third Ascension. The chances of a successful resurrection were far slimmer than with his previous deaths. His closest battle-brothers, bonded to him through incessant training and live combat, stood wordless and tense, anxious for his success. Some had counselled him against undergoing those rites, but Karras had been determined, sensing a greater destiny might lie along that path, not to mention a significant leap in power. He knew he had the potential to survive it. Thus, he had crossed over once again and felt familiar dark waters flow around him.

The currents of the Black River bothered him not at all that final time. He had mastered them by mastering himself. But his advanced psychic power was so great a beacon that it drew the attention of something new – a different order of beast from the Other Realm. Something sickening broke through that day, as Karras had known it must. It was a vast, pulsing thing of constantly changing forms, of countless mouths and tendrils, of strange grasping appendages that defied comparison with anything he had known. It was rage and hate and hunger, and it fell upon him with savage glee. The battle was one of wills, of two minds struggling for supremacy with everything they had, and it had seemed to last aeons. In the end, they proved well-matched, the abomination and he. Both spent themselves utterly in the fight. They became locked together in mental exhaustion, and the currents began to drag them both into the mouth of oblivion. But Karras rallied. The prayers and hopes of his battle-brothers penetrated to his consciousness from the distant realm of the living, energising him for one last, desperate push.

The surge of psychic strength blasted him free, and the beast was dragged

away by the Black River, raging and thrashing against its fate until it was swallowed by distance and time and absolute darkness.

Karras's cold corpse began to breathe again. Twin hearts kicked back to life.

He returned from death that day triumphant, a Codicier of the Death Spectres Librarius at last, and the Chapter rejoiced, for such gifted brothers were few.

In the long years since, Karras had served in that role, rarely setting foot back on Occludus. War had kept him away. He did the Chapter's work, the Emperor's work. It was what he had been born to do.

But, at last, his khadit had called him back.

There had been a development; an opportunity to earn great honour for himself and the Chapter both.

It was a rare chance to serve as never before.

'The time is soon,' his khadit had told him. 'One must return before the other departs. Until then, go out alone. Be with your thoughts. Think on who and what you are. Sense of self is the pillar that supports us when all else falls. Go. I will send for you when the time comes.'

So Karras had started walking. Walking and thinking. Remembering.

He sensed a trio of souls, such strong shining souls, approaching from the east at speed. Fellow Death Spectres; their ethereal signature was unmistakable, as familiar and comforting as the land itself. He turned into the freezing wind to meet their approach just as something vast and dark and angular rolled in over the hills, almost clipping them. It pulled up great skirts of loose snow as it came skimming towards his location. Powerful turbofan engines drummed on the air. It slowed and began a fiery, vertical descent, turning the snow all around it to steam. The craft settled on thick landing stanchions with a sharp hiss of hydraulic pistons. There was a loud clang. Orange light flowed like liquid over the snow as a boarding ramp lowered.

It was a Thunderhawk gunship from the Chapter's crypt-city, Logopol, and its arrival was a bittersweet thing to Karras.

His time out here alone was over. This visit to the Chapter world had been all too brief. What lay ahead, he knew, would make the trials of his past seem a mere game by comparison. He didn't need witchsight to tell him that.

Only one in twenty ever returned alive from service in the Deathwatch.

Evening came, such as it was in Cholixe. The sky never changed over the canyon-city. The slice that was visible between the towering walls of rock was a constant twilight purple pierced by las-bright stars. But, at the tone of the evening bell, more lamps were lit and the streets and alleys became busier. A simulated evening. People seemed to need that cycle of night and day. A hangover from the days of Old Terra, it comforted them, even so poorly approximated as this.

The men who lived here, stocky Nightsiders for the most part, moved in work-parties, either returning from a long hard shift in the mines, or departing for the start of one. Weary mothers led young children home from Ecclesiarchy-run schola while older children weaved between the flows of human traffic, kicking trash and calling out to each other in voices too coarse for their scant years.

The air was thick with the smell of grox oil from the streetlamps. It was a salty, burned-meat smell, and it clung to clothes and hair and skin. No bath or shower ever seemed to remove it completely. One came to ignore it in time, but it still bothered Ordimas Arujo. He had only been on Chiaro a year.

It still struck him, too, the oppressive nature of the place. Hemmed in between the sheer cliffs, which rose four kilometres high on either side, the city blocks were pressed together like people in an overcrowded train. The tallest buildings, precariously top-heavy and shoddily built, loomed like dark, hungry giants over the inhabitants, as if readying to fall upon them and feed. Thick black utility cables hung between them like the strands of some chaotic spider's web, humming with electrical power and badly digitised voices. Alleyways were often so narrow here that the broad-shouldered men from the mines had to walk sideways down them just to get to their own tenement doors.

Such was the life of the average Chiarite, at least here in Cholixe. Those of loftier rank mostly lived and worked in structures cut straight into the canyon walls. Their broad diamonite windows, warm with steady golden light, looked out over the city below; not the best view perhaps, but Ordimas suspected the air was a lot cleaner up there. He could imagine how it felt to look down on this grimy, oily pit of a town while one drank fine liquor from a crystal goblet after a hot shower.

*Not this time.*

He had known both the high life and the lowest in his many travels, but man-of-station was not his role here on Chiaro. Here, he was a humble street performer. Here, he was the Puppeteer.

It was the younger children of Cholixe for whom Ordimas regularly performed. Day after day, at the southern edge of Great Market Square, he set up his benches and the little plastex stage on which his stories played out. The local vendors had no love for him, always scowling and cursing at him, warding themselves against black fate with the sign of the aquila while he and his assistant arranged the stage. But they had no authority to move him on, and he paid them no mind. They didn't interest him much. The children, however...

*So many more than before. And so strange, this new generation.*

As the modest crowd watched his marionettes dance on the tiny stage, Ordimas peered out from behind the gauzy screen that hid him. *Aye. So strange.* While half the audience laughed, clapped and gasped at all the proper moments, the others sat as cold and motionless as mantelpiece figurines. Nothing reached them. No words passed between them. No flicker of emotion or interaction at all. There were boys and girls both, and all seemed to share a queer aspect. Their hair was somewhat thinner than it ought to be. Their skin had an unhealthy tint to it. And their eyes, those unblinking eyes... He couldn't be certain, not absolutely, but they seemed to have a strange shining quality, like the eyes of wolves or cats, only to be seen when thick shadow passed over them.

Most unsettling of all, however, was a fact more related to their mothers than to the children themselves. Ordimas had seen these women before here in the market. He had a good eye for beauty, despite, or perhaps because of, his own wretched form. He often watched the young women pass by. That's why he was certain, without a shadow of a doubt, that some of their pregnancies had lasted less than three months.

*Three months. It shouldn't be possible.*

Yet here they were, standing over their tiny charges as his performance came to an end, living their lives as if nothing was amiss. It was absurd.

His marionettes took a bow signalling the end of the show. Ordimas manipulated one cross-frame so that the puppet of Saint Cirdan, having vanquished the warboss Borgblud in the final act, raised its sword aloft. 'For the glory of the Emperor!' Ordimas piped in the character's reedy voice.

'For the glory of the Emperor!' echoed half the children with delight.

Ordimas tapped a pedal with his foot and the curtain fell on the little stage.

From the more normal-looking children there came rapturous applause and cries of joy. From the others, only lifeless stares. After a moment, these latter rose to their feet and, wordlessly as always, sought out their mothers at the back of the crowd.

‘You’re up,’ said Ordimas, turning to his young assistant.

The boy, Nedra, nodded with a grin and, taking the cloth cap from his head, he went out among the audience to call for coin. Ordimas heard him thanking those mothers who spared a centim or two. He didn’t need the money, of course. Ordimas was already rich beyond the dreams of most men, though he looked far from it. His Lordship was a generous employer, despite the two having never actually met. Still, what puppeteer performed for free in the Imperium? It was important not to raise undue suspicions while his intelligence was still incomplete. Just a few more days and the report would be ready. Besides, the boy Nedra was earning his keep. He was proud of his job as Ordimas’s assistant. *So kind, that boy.* He had never once looked on Ordimas with disgust or loathing, though he himself was already showing signs that he would be a handsome young man in a few years if given half a chance.

Ordimas would be sorry to leave him, but he’d see the boy a’right. He always did. There was always some waif or stray that he picked up on long assignments, especially when sent among the downtrodden. When he left – and he always did – he hoped he left them with a better life than before; better than they would have had, at any rate.

He had trained Nedra well. There would still be a puppet show in Great Market Square after Ordimas left the planet.

Packing his marionettes into their case, Ordimas only wondered if, a year from now, there would be any *natural* children left here to enjoy it.

## 5

The Thunderhawk flight back to Logopol was brief, a little over an hour, and Karras was back in time to witness the arrival of the black drop-shuttle that would, all too soon, carry him up into orbit. The atmosphere in the fortress-monastery's massive east hangar was solemn, even more so than usual. Karras stood on his khadit's left, wordless and, despite mentally reciting a mantra against doubt, more than a little anxious. Each cut a tall, powerful figure, but Athio Cordatus, the Mesazar, Master of the Librarius, had a certain heavy solidity that Karras had yet to develop. It was a hard, powerful thickness common to Space Marines who survived the wars of five centuries or more. It made the old warrior seem like a living mountain, even now, out of armour, dressed in his hooded robe of blue and gold. Karras and Cordatus shared a brief look as the black shuttlecraft settled onto its stanchions and powered down its engines.

Across from the Librarians stood the entire Third Company of the Death Spectres Space Marines, here to witness in sorrow and respect the return to the Chapter of one of their own. Unlike the two psykers, the battle-brothers of Third Company stood in full plate, eschewing only their helms as per the occasion. Each held a polished bolter across his broad armoured chest.

The shuttle's ramp rang dully on the hangar floor. A slim figure in a tight black officer's uniform and stiffened cap descended. He marched three metres from the bottom of the ramp and dropped to one knee, head bowed, waiting.

Captain Elgrist stepped from his place at the head of Third Company and walked out to meet the officer from the shuttle. Karras watched him. It had been many years, many battles, but Elgrist looked well, resplendent in fact, with his white cloak flaring out behind him as he marched. Still, there was pain written on his face. It was he who had nominated Stephanus for Deathwatch service, and the Chapter had lost one of its finest as a result.

Though Elgrist and the black-clad officer spoke at normal volume in the vast and windy hangar, the gene-boostered hearing of the Space Marines in attendance picked up every word.

'Rise,' said Elgrist. 'I am Rohiam Elgrist, the Megron[\[6\]](#) and the Third Captain.'

The officer from the shuttle stood as commanded and, straightening to attention, looked up into all-red eyes. The Third Captain stood almost eighty centimetres taller than he. Swallowing in a dry throat, the officer steeled himself and said, 'I am honoured, lord. My name is Flight Lieutenant Carvail Qree of the *Adonai*. Address me as you please. I... I'm afraid my duty is not a happy one.'

'Nevertheless,' said Elgrist, 'you are welcome here on this hallowed ground, lieutenant. We are aware of the duty that has brought you to Logopol. Would that it were indeed happier.'

'Aye, lord. If it be any comfort to you, I am told he died well, saving the brothers of his kill-team and ending a threat that would have seen many thousands slaughtered by xenos tooth and claw. That, of course, is all I was told. There are protocols—'

'The Deathwatch operates in shadow. We know this. We accept this. Still, your words offer comfort. His brothers shall be glad to know he died well and for good gain.'

Qree opened a latched leather tube on his belt and withdrew a furled scroll which, in the palms of both hands, he offered up to the Third captain. 'Watch Commander Jaeger asked that I deliver this with the body. It is encrypted, of course, but I am told your Chapter already possesses the key. I fear that you will find few answers within, but perhaps the contents will further honour the fallen.'

Elgrist took the scroll in a large gauntleted hand and nodded.

'It shall be passed to the Megir.' Seeing the lieutenant's confusion, Elgrist added, 'To the Chapter Master.'

That much was a lie, of course. The Megir could not be troubled with such things. His burden was too great by far. But the Imperium at large must never know what lay below Logopol. It was to Athio Cordatus that the scroll would be given. It was the Mesazar who commanded the Chapter while the First Spectre sat suffering in a chamber deep below the city's catacombs.

Flight Lieutenant Qree inclined his head. 'I see. Well, I believe this concludes the first part of my duty, my lord. Shall I signal for the body to be...'

He almost said *unloaded* but the word struck him as disrespectful. Silence hung for a moment while Qree grasped for a more appropriate term. After the span of a few seconds, however, Captain Elgrist interceded.

'If you would, lieutenant. Please.'

'At once, m'lord.'

Qree reached up and pressed a brass stud in his starched black collar. Into this

stud, he muttered, 'Begin the procession.' A moment later, six figures in black robes of mourning descended the shuttle ramp. They carried censers that trailed wisps of pungent incense as they swung to and fro with each slow, deliberate step. They sang softly and deeply as they descended, a low, humming lament that reached out to the aural senses of all present and held them fast. The quality of sorrow in that soft, hypnotic song was palpable. Normal men would weep to hear it, and Lieutenant Qree fought hard to keep tears from his eyes, not with complete success. The assembled Space Marines wept not, but their battle-worn faces, all ghostly white with blood-red eyes, betrayed the deep sadness that pulled on their hearts.

Karras felt it tug at his own hearts as his psychic awareness was pricked by their grief. Stephanus would have made captain one day, but that honour had been taken from him, swapped for another. He had died in battle, which was proper, but he had fallen surrounded not by his Occludian brothers but by strangers from other worlds, other Chapters. Such was the end of a Deathwatch operative. Was it worth it? Was Deathwatch service the greater of the two honours, or the lesser? Putting his prejudice aside, Karras searched himself for an honest answer, knowing full well that he, like Stephanus, might return here on a shuttle crewed by men in robes of mourning.

But he would reach no real conclusion, he decided, until service was upon him. Time would answer the questions that soul-searching could not.

Between the six hooded mourners, a long, thick, lidless sarcophagus of black onyx appeared, floating silently on the air, keeping pace perfectly with its escort, upheld and propelled by tiny anti-gravitic motors. The mourners reached the bottom of the ramp and guided the onyx block to Captain Elgrist. There, a few metres in front of him, they dropped to their right knees and bowed their heads. The song stopped.

Qree threw back his shoulders, chest out, chin raised, took a deep breath, and said in a sonorous voice, 'To his beloved brothers, to those that forged him, to those that knew him best, we commend the body of the fallen in the name of the Deathwatch. May his sacrifice be honoured until the ending of all things.'

'So shall it be,' boomed the Third Captain in response.

'So shall it be,' echoed the assembled brothers, Karras and his master included.

At a nod from Elgrist, four sergeants moved forwards from the ranks of Third Company and walked towards the floating sarcophagus. The six robed mourners rose from their knees, bowed low to the Third captain, turned, and silently

drifted back up the shuttle ramp. The Space Marine sergeants took up position around the sarcophagus, each raising his right hand to his lips then touching his fingers to the cold forehead of their fallen comrade.

Captain Elgrist turned to face Qree once more.

‘Your duty is done and done well, lieutenant. One has returned. Another shall leave with you.’ Here, he indicated Karras with a nod. Qree looked over, caught Karras’s eye, and bowed. Karras nodded back.

‘Chapter-serfs will attend your crew while Brother Karras says his goodbyes,’ Elgrist continued. ‘Your shuttle will be refuelled.’ He gestured to an archway in the hangar’s north wall. ‘You may take repast in the antechamber beyond that door and make ablutions as you will. Third Company thanks you for your service.’

‘It was my honour, though not my pleasure, my lord.’

‘Go in peace, then, and may you long serve the Golden Throne.’

Qree bowed, at which point Elgrist turned and strode to the head of the four sergeants. At a word, he led them to the great arched corridor that dominated the western wall and would take them towards the heart of the crypt-city. As the sergeants and the sarcophagus passed beneath the sculpted arch, the remaining battle-brothers of Third Company turned as one and marched in ordered lines, following their captain and the body of Brother Stephanus out of the massive hangar. Karras and Cordatus watched them go.

‘A day of saddened hearts,’ said Karras.

‘And yet we are blessed,’ said his khadit. ‘Most that fall in Deathwatch service are never recovered. While the gene-seed was ruined before it could be extracted, he shall at least be mummified properly and interred in the holy catacombs of his Chapter world. Would that every brother could be honoured so, but it is the exception rather than the rule.’

These last words were said pointedly, their message clear:

*Be one of the exceptions.*

Serfs bearing the Chapter sigil emerged from one of the north passageways and moved towards the shuttle. They were masked with steel – each face a polished, grinning skull – and robed in black, all but one who wore the white robes and gold skull-mask of the upper ranks. This one went to Qree and, after a few words, led him away from the hangar. Moments later, the rest of the shuttle crew descended and followed the other serfs into the antechamber Elgrist had indicated.

‘Do not keep them overlong, my *khajar* [7],’ said Cordatus. ‘May I assume all

your affairs are in order?’

‘I am ready in all but mind,’ answered Karras.

Cordatus smiled. ‘No one is ever truly ready for such a duty, and I can do little more to prepare you. The Deathwatch holds rigidly to its protocols of secrecy, and for reasons I’ll not venture to question. But you will adapt. You are worthy at least to try. Before you leave, the Megir has asked that you attend him.’

*The Megir.*

*First Spectre, Grandmaster of the Order, Lord of Occludus...*

*...The Eye that Pierces the Veil.*

It was very rare for the Megir to see anyone but the First Captain, the High Chaplain, or Cordatus himself. Karras had not laid eyes on the First Spectre since his ascension to that position, but his power could be felt everywhere. Logopol pulsed with it. One could feel it resonating even in orbit. To Karras, it was part of being home.

‘Go,’ said Cordatus. ‘Robed as you are. Enter the great dome barefoot and kneel before him to make your obeisance. When you exit, send me a thought and I shall meet you back here.’

‘It will be as you say, my lord. I go with haste.’

One did not keep the Megir waiting.

Dismissed, Karras left the hangar, taking the great archway by which Third Company had departed. His mind was reeling. He had never imagined the Megir would call upon him before he entered service with the Deathwatch. In truth, he was unsettled and utterly unprepared. His khadit had spoken of the Shariax only occasionally, and all warmth seemed to bleed from him whenever he had.

*It is the Throne of Glass from which no First Spectre ever rises alive. It is both the Chapter’s greatest burden and its greatest gift. Without it, all hope of the Great Resurrection is lost. Ah, what a price we pay for faith.*

On the very day of his ascension, the First Spectre had gone alone into the darkest depths of Logopol and had never come back. It was always so, a custom thousands of years old, beginning with Corcaedus the Founder who, driven by a vision from the Emperor Himself, had brought his Death Spectres to Occludus.

The vision had shown him exactly where to delve. He had found the great dome – the Temple of Voices – sitting silent, patient, in its vast cavern many kilometres below ground. Within the dome, he found the ancient secret it had kept hidden since before the dawn of the Imperium.

On his command, Logopol had been built directly above it.

*So much history. So much significance. The destiny of the Chapter. Its purpose.*

Karras didn't feel ready. Not for this.  
But he kept walking.

## 6

Athio Cordatus watched his khajar emerge into the hangar, dressed now in dark blue fatigues and black boots, flanked by serfs and servitors carrying his wargear and the limited belongings permitted by the Deathwatch.

Karras looked hollow, stunned even. It was clear he had been profoundly disturbed by his time with the Megir. Cordatus didn't need to ask why. The Megir as Karras would have remembered him was a vision of strength and power, of boundless vitality and an insatiable hunger for victory in battle. Not so the figure that now led the Chapter from his life-leeching throne. There in the depths sat a withered thing, muscles atrophied, bone structure starkly visible beneath skin that was gradually turning black. His beard and hair, white as Occludian snow, had grown long and thin. He no longer moved, no longer spoke with lips and breath. His body was undergoing slow petrification. In due course, he would turn completely to stone. The Shariax did this, but the power it offered in return, a power unknown anywhere else in all the worlds of man, made such suffering a dark necessity. The Chapter could not fulfil its destiny without it.

*We waited so long for him, thought Cordatus. So many others were lost along the way. But in Lyandro Karras, the calculations, the breeding, the manipulation; it has all come together at last. The sacrifice of the Chapter Masters will not be in vain.*

Whatever visions or words the First Spectre had shared with Karras were a matter for the two alone. Cordatus would not ask. He would, no doubt, be summoned below after his khajar left for space. The Megir would share anything he needed to know then.

Cordatus dared not explain the depths of the Chapter's hopes to Karras. At least, not directly or in any great detail. The sharing of that knowledge would alter the very future it suggested. But there were other methods to steer him along the critical path. Cordatus had seeded several prime futures with a series of psychic messages, each intended to corral Karras in the necessary direction. Only time would tell if those messages were ever received. The act of placing them had taken Cordatus beyond the previous limits of his capabilities. It had stretched him to a point perilously close to absolute psychic collapse, after which, warded or not by his tattoos and holy amulets, he would have been

unable to resist possession. There was no thought more chilling to a Librarian: that a daemon of the warp might swallow his soul, claim his body, and turn his powers upon the Order he loved above all else... The word *nightmare* was hardly adequate.

As Cordatus had scored his messages in the surface of time to come, the Black River had surged and crashed around him, carrying him almost into the Afterworld. But he was not the Mesazar for nothing. Few among even the most powerful Librarians of the Adeptus Astartes would have survived, but among those few Athio Cordatus stood as one.

*When you return, my khajar... if you return... it may be I who sits atop the Shariax. I would pray to Terra to be spared such a fate, but it is inevitable, and it is my duty. I shall embrace it for the sake of the Order, though I am a lesser man than the First Spectre, and I may not last as long.*

Cordatus watched his khajar march to the middle of the hangar and stop, facing the sleek black shuttle that would take him up to the *Adonai*. Behind him, the serfs and servitors trundled to a halt. Arranged in ranks on either side of the hangar, every Space Marine in Logopol, with the exception of the members of Third Company and those others whose duties could not be postponed, stood in attendance, dressed in full plate to honour their brother on his leaving. The mood was grim. This was not like a standard departure. All those present knew the odds were against Karras ever returning, alive or dead.

Cordatus had used Karras's time below to have the tech-priests dress him in full power armour. The Chief Librarian stood now as a polished, gleaming vision of power and position, his shimmering ceramite replete with purity seals, the sculpted icon of the Crux Terminatus, and several formal pieces inscribed or embossed with details and renderings of his greatest personal glories. From his massive pauldrons, a thick cloak trailed all the way to the hangar floor.

In truth, Cordatus felt overdressed as he looked at his khajar. Karras had donned simple combat fatigues of dark Librarian blue. He seemed almost naked in comparison to the armoured might of the others. But that was as it should be. Instructions from the Deathwatch were explicit: those sequestered into service were to arrive out of armour. They would not wear it again until the taking of Second Oath. To those who had never served, that meant little. But Cordatus remembered his own term of service, despite the intervening centuries. Those days of relentless training without his second skin had made him feel like a damned neophyte again. Karras would not relish it, as he himself had not, but there was purpose behind it. His khajar would come to see that quickly.

Flight Lieutenant Qree, who had since re-boarded the shuttle to make final preparations for take-off, descended the craft's ramp now and stopped in front of Karras. He bowed low and spoke a few words of greeting. Karras couldn't manage a smile. He nodded. The lieutenant bowed again, turned sharply and marched back to the shuttle, followed now by Karras's serfs and baggage servitors. The First Codicier stood alone, the eyes of his battle-brothers on him. It was time.

Cordatus was glad he was here for this. His combat duties in The Cape of Lost Hope – the stellar tip of the local spiral arm – had ended only weeks ago with the detestable dark eldar beaten back at last, though they would return in due course. Cordatus believed the timing to be no accident. Perhaps it was the hand of Fate intervening on his behalf, or perhaps the hand of the Emperor Himself or the countless spirits of humanity's dead. Whatever the cause, Cordatus had again been able to take a direct hand in steering this warrior on whom so much depended.

*Time to bid him farewell.*

He marched forwards, stopped before his khajar, met his gaze and offered formal salute. This he did in the ancient manner of the Chapter, left hand held flat at the abdomen, palm up, right hand clenched in a vertical fist resting on the palm of the left. It was the *masrahim*, the salute of skull and stone. Its meaning was simple, but it was not a salute made lightly: *I will honour you in death as I do now in life.*

Karras, though still shaken badly by what he had seen in the Temple of Voices, managed to return the salute, eyes locked with those of his teacher, red locked to red.

Cordatus could see the torment there. He knew it all too well himself. Today, for the first time, Karras had seen the Megir upon the Throne of Glass. He was bound to be profoundly disturbed. Cordatus's own hearts broke every time he went below at the psychic call of his old friend and master.

*Better Corcaedus had never found the Shariax.*

No. That wasn't true, and such thought bordered on Chapter heresy. If the vision of the Founder ever came to pass, all the sacrifice in the galaxy would be made worthwhile, even – and it burned Cordatus to concede it – the soul of Lyandro Karras.

'My khajar,' said Cordatus. 'You carry the honour of the Order on your shoulders. The reputation of the Chapter is in your hands. Do not stain it. Serve well. Earn the respect of those around you. Show by your example the strength

and quality of the Death Spectres.’

‘It shall be as you command, khadit. They shall know us by our strength and spirit. This I swear on my life.’

*Preserve that life, my son,* thought Cordatus. *Preserve it at any cost.*

He did not voice this.

Instead, he placed a hand on Karras’s shoulder and sent a command-pulse to a servitor waiting silently in the shadows. The mind-wiped man-machine ambled forwards, cog-knees whirring and jinking. In its metal pincers it held a weapon, long and slender, of such history and power that it had a soul of its own – and not a mere machine-spirit to be coaxed into operation with oils and litanies, but a soul that burned as bright as any man’s.

‘*Arquemann?*’ asked Karras in confusion as the servitor stopped on his right.

‘Aye,’ said Cordatus. ‘I entrust it to you now, may you serve each other well in the trials to come.’

‘I-I cannot,’ stammered Karras. This was a thing too great. The weapon, he knew, had once been laid at the feet of the Golden Throne on Terra. The Founder, to whom it had once belonged, had placed it before the Emperor just seconds before receiving his vision. After the Shariax itself, and the bones and armour of Corcaedus, this ancient force sword was the holiest relic on Occludus.

He shook his head and took a staggering step back. ‘Khadit,’ he said. ‘I dare not even touch it.’

‘You can and will,’ ordered Cordatus. ‘The First Spectre commands. You cannot disobey. Please, khajar. Take it with honour and gladness. *Arquemann* is sensitive to the thoughts of those who wield it, and it will serve you better if you accept it with pride.’

Karras reached out hesitantly, reverently, and touched the flat of the blade. Witchlight coruscated along it as the sword sensed his psychic strength. Karras felt the sword’s spirit probing his own, learning his signature, even... could it be... evaluating him? Was that possible? If so, what was the sword’s assessment? Athio Cordatus had wielded it in battle since the ascension of the Megir. Great honour had been earned in the time since. Did the weapon now rage at this transfer to a lesser warrior?

Karras gripped the hilt and lifted the blade before him. He felt a sharp mental jolt as his power was joined with the blade’s own. Was this acceptance? There was a psychic pulse, a flash of fractured images, of monstrous foes wounded or cut down. Were these the sword’s memories, or glimpses of things yet to be? It was long seconds before he remembered to take a breath.

‘Decline cryostasis on your journey to the Watch fortress,’ Cordatus advised him. ‘Spend those weeks training with the blade. There will be time for you and *Arquemann* to bond properly on the journey through the warp. Practise with it often and to extremes, and together you will become a force formidable beyond the limitations you thought you had. So it was with me.’

*Farewell, proud weapon. No other can fill the gap you leave.*

‘You honour me more than I deserve, khadit,’ said Karras, breaking eye contact, looking down in contrition. ‘But then, you have always honoured me more than I deserve.’

Cordatus grinned. ‘Let me be the judge of that.’

The grin was short-lived. He could draw this out no longer. ‘Our time together is again at its end, khajar. We part once more. If destiny wills it, we shall stand together again and speak words of greeting rather than farewell. Such is my fervent hope. Now face your brothers proudly, lift your voice, and call out those words so sacred to our Order.’

Karras slung *Arquemann* over his head and one shoulder, hanging the sword diagonally across his back by its black harness. He turned to face the Space Marines in their ordered ranks by the south wall and let the sight of them lift his hearts. They were glorious, all of them.

*Remember this, he told himself. Hold to it. Remember who you honour.*

In a loud, clear voice he called out to those he faced, ‘Fear not death, we who embody it in His name.’

The response erupted like thunder from the throats of all assembled.

‘We fear not Death!’ they bellowed. ‘For we are Death incarnate!’

‘Now go,’ said Cordatus. ‘Depart to honour and glory, scion of the Spectres of Death. And may your deeds be written in the blood of many foes!’

Cordatus stepped aside, armour plates scraping quietly as he moved. Karras fixed unblinking eyes on the ramp of the black shuttle and marched past him in heavy silence. There was yet much he wanted to say to his khadit, but the time for words was past. He doubted he could have found the appropriate ones to express all he felt.

Instead, as Karras reached the base of the ramp, he paused, then turned and saluted the Master of the Librarius once more, fist on palm, the masrahim.

In response, Cordatus raised a clenched fist into the air and boomed out, ‘The First Codicier!’

Sixty-eight Space Marines raised their armoured right fists as one. ‘The First Codicier!’ they roared, and the words echoed back at Karras from the hangar’s

great stone walls.

He turned from them and stalked up the ramp, conscious of the weight of *Arquemann* and of his duty both. It did not do to dwell on partings. They were hard enough. Instead, he centred his mind on the immediate future. He faced the unknown. Unlike those whose gifts pierced the veils of time, Karras saw only fragments in dreams, misted generalities, blurred visions of possibility and chance almost impossible to distinguish from the typical conjurings of a dreaming mind. His gifts were given more to psychic combat than to scrying.

He knew this much, however:

The Deathwatch would either make him or destroy him.

Athio Cordatus watched the shuttle ramp slowly rise. It sealed with all the dark finality of a sarcophagus lid.

*I should be rejoicing, he thought bitterly. This is all as destiny dictates. And yet...*

The craft's engines rose in pitch to a deafening roar. Shakily at first, the shuttle lifted slowly into the air. With a twin burst of flame from the small vents in its nose, it backed out into the open air beyond the hangar mouth. There, a black shadow against a heavy, snow-filled sky, it turned and rose, lifting out of sight on a trail of fire and smoke.

Cordatus dismissed the others and strode to the hangar's edge. He looked out into the charcoal grey afternoon long after the glow of the shuttle's jets had gone from sight.

'Return to us alive, Lyandro,' he murmured to himself. 'The Watch will change you in the ways we need, but only if you survive it. You must return alive.'

'For without the Cadash[8], mankind will falter and die.'

Nedra finished counting out the coins from the last performance, added the total to that of the morning show and proudly announced the sum to Ordimas, who lay on his shabby cot dozing lightly.

‘Three ducats and seventeen centims! That’s half a ducat more than yesterday, boss.’

Ordimas opened his left eye, looked over at the boy and threw him a grin. ‘Take thirty of those centims and get us something hot to eat, my lad. We’ve earned it. Before that, though, take another twenty and ask old Skaiman in the next block to fix those shoes.’ He pointed a finger at Nedra’s feet. ‘They’re about to fall off. Shoes first. I don’t want my dinner getting cold before you get back.’

Nedra practically jumped off his stool. ‘Really, boss? It’s okay?’

Ordimas closed his eyes again and gave a short nod. ‘Just don’t waste it on re-processed grox-burgers from the stand. I want real food tonight. Your choice, hear, but something decent.’

Joy suited Nedra. It suited those bright eyes and that face so void of malice. Ordimas thought back to the day he had found the boy, a little less than a year ago. Nedra had been hiding in a length of broken outflow pipe on the city’s southern edge. His sobs had given him away. He had been brutally beaten by one of the miners after refusing to surrender the contents of his begging bowl. He still bore the scars, inside and out. Ordimas had never found the perpetrator. It was too late now to hope he ever would. A pity, that; dispensing a little righteous violence would have been very satisfying. Now, though...

*Only a few more days. Damn it, I’ll miss you, boy.*

‘On your way, now,’ he told Nedra. ‘I need a nap.’

The boy pocketed the coins, grabbed a cloth bag from a hook by the door, tugged his cap on, yanked the door open, and vanished off into the street.

The door swung shut. Ordimas listened as Nedra trotted past the rusting window shutters. When the sound had faded, he swung his short legs over the side of the cot and stood up. The twisted leg ached as he moved. It always did, but he’d learned to ignore it most of the time. Turning and leaning down, he pulled a black plasteel case from beneath the cot, carried it over to the table and sat. It bore no markings, but it was heavy and its construction was flawless, a

thing far too valuable to belong to a mere street performer. There was a keypad on the surface. Ordimas tapped in a twenty-four digit access code, fingers moving in a blur. There was a soft hiss as the stasis seal disengaged. The lid slid backwards about two centimetres before rotating into a vertical position, revealing the powerful field cogitator and burst-comms unit within.

Ordimas leaned forwards and let a small laser lens in the unit's upper housing scan his left retina. There was a half-second delay before the glossy black screen flickered to life.

*Select function*, it said.

'Report 227a/Cholixe,' Ordimas told the machine in a hushed voice.

*Review previous entry(s)? Begin new entry(s)? Other?*, asked the machine.

'Begin new entry.'

*Ready for connection.*

Ordimas did something then that he could never let Nedra see. Raising thumb and forefinger to his right eye, he pressed inwards at the corners. After a second, a rubbery skin – the white of the eye, the brown iris, the black pupil – came away in his hand. Beneath this overlay, sitting deep in the eye socket, was an orb of gunmetal-grey. In the centre of the orb glowed a red lens about half the diameter of a one-centim coin.

He hunched forwards to bring his optical implant in line with the unit's scan-lens. The machine spent a moment acquiring him before a pencil-thin beam of red light formed a bridge between them. This was the data-stream, and Ordimas committed all the day's relevant observations to it. Smells, sights, sounds, even those elements that only his subconscious had noted; everything was transferred to the machine's crystal matrix memory drive.

It took less than a minute.

When it was done, Ordimas leaned back and fitted his false eye-cover into place.

'Save entry and transmit,' he told the machine.

*Entry saved. Beginning transmission...*

Several minutes passed.

*Transmission sent. Select next function.*

'Stand by,' said Ordimas.

If he judged right, and he usually did, Nedra wouldn't return for another forty minutes. Ordimas left the machine on the table. He was thirsty. He was always thirsty after a transfer. He walked to the tiny kitchen, turned on the noisy, flickering lume-strip in the ceiling and poured himself a cup of watered wine. He

drank half on the spot, the cold liquid soothing his throat, then returned to the table. There he sat, thinking and sipping from the cup.

He wouldn't miss this filthy cesspit of a city. Part of him wasn't looking forward to leaving, but only because of the boy. He remembered the sorrow he'd felt at leaving the others. It always lessened in time, but he never forgot them, not any of them. Despite his hopes, the realist in him knew most of those children were probably dead by now. His Lordship didn't send Ordimas Arujo to safe, healthy places. His arrival anywhere meant a cancer had developed already, something deeply wrong, something that the Great and the Powerful needed him to observe on their behalf.

Chiaro was no different. The whole planet was like a giant workhouse. The Imperium's rapacious hunger for resources had forced two different peoples to settle this hellish world – the Hasmiri, or Daysiders, and the Garrahym, known here on Chiaro as the Nightsiders. And how they hated each other for all their religious and genetic differences. Both were Imperial loyalists, of course. They worshipped the Emperor as the Ecclesiarchy demanded of them. But the writings of their patron saints were, in places, at great odds. The Daysiders mined provium, darksilver and carzum – all of which were used in the Geller field projectors so important to warp transit. They toiled beneath the heat-blistered rock of the baking sunward hemisphere. The Nightsiders, on the other hand, worked far beneath the deep-frozen surface of the void-facing hemisphere where no sunlight ever reached the ground. They searched for veins of soledite and margonite, both of which were found only on a scattered two-dozen or so Imperial worlds. Ordimas didn't know what these materials were used for. Very few did.

For all their differences, both peoples endured the same daily reality. Life on Chiaro was only possible in the Twilight Band. That meant living in the canyon, the Nystarean Gorge, and one of the two cities built within it: Cholixe or Najra.

*I can't take him with me. That hasn't changed. I can't stop working for His Lordship, either. Old Ordimas knows too much by half. There's no retirement for the likes of me, unless I count death a retirement, which I guess it is.*

A winking glyph on the little screen caught his eye, and he wondered how long it had been flashing at him while he sat there thinking.

*One message, it said. Priority A-2.*

Ordimas's breath caught in his throat. It was the first A-2 communiqué he had ever received. His Lordship never initiated comms before an assignment was properly completed. At least, he had never done so before.

Ordimas licked his lips, suddenly dry.  
'Display message,' he told the machine.

*Recipient: Asset 16*

*Source: Priority A-2 DSC – Key 'Sigma'*

*Identicode: Classified 'Uridion: Eyes Only'*

*Most recent transmission received. Under review. New orders as follows:*

*Contrive entry to active mining sector as part of work-detail. Gather observational intelligence. Everything relevant. One shift sufficient. Two days hence, rendezvous with Ordo representative, field code White Phoenix. Transfer all data to representative and exfiltrate. Expect off-world transport options limited. White Phoenix will advise.*

*Protocols and data-files attached. Access by opticom only. Full auto-erase will begin immediately after transfer.*

*That is all.*

*Ave Imperator.*

White Phoenix? That assignment wasn't familiar to Ordimas. He sensed an urgency in the message he couldn't put his finger on. The work-party placement meant a stealth kill first. He didn't look forward to using the drug. His genes were his curse, and he knew all too well that he would never be free. His unique chromosomal heritage had brought him to the attention of the Holy Inquisition in the first place.

*And once you're in, you never get out.*

Familiar footsteps sounded outside, echoing along the alleyway, announcing the return of young Nedra. But something was wrong. Ordimas read dismay in the sound. Almost panic.

Thrusting his face forwards, closer to the machine, he whispered, 'Session end.' The unit on the table closed and locked itself abruptly. With a hiss, the stasis-seal re-engaged. Ordimas hefted the case off the table and hastily slung it back under his cot. He was rising just as Nedra burst through the door.

Ordimas turned and saw at once that his young charge was shaking. Nedra's eyes were brimming with tears yet to spill. He stood fighting to hold them back.

'I-I saw him, boss,' he stammered.

Ordimas didn't need to ask who. He'd seen Nedra like this only once before.

'Where?'

'The meat market,' managed the boy.

*Only a few blocks away!* Ordimas felt raw hatred clench his stomach. A scowl twisted his lop-sided face. 'Did he see you?'

Nedra shook his head and the first tear spilled over, rolling and dropping from his cheek. Conscious of it as it splashed on the toe of one of his newly repaired shoes, the boy turned aside, not wanting his boss to see him break down. Other tears began to flow.

‘I’m sorry, boss,’ he sniffed. ‘I didn’t get any food. I...’

‘Peace, lad,’ said Ordimas, moving to the boy’s side. He laid a hand on Nedra’s shoulder. ‘It’s well that you found him. I’ve business with the bastard.’ *And I may be able to kill two birds with one stone*, he thought. ‘Come. Show him to me.’

Nedra shook his head. ‘I can’t. He’s twice your size, boss. Big as a bull grox. Let’s just stay here. I’ll get some bread from Clavian’s on the corner. We’ll eat.’

‘No! You’ll take me to him. And don’t underestimate me, boy. There’s much about old Ordimas Arujo that none would guess, not even you.’

Nedra turned again, gaping, tears forgotten. Ordimas had never spoken to him so sharply before. It was like being slapped. A stony, unfamiliar hardness had entered the puppeteer’s gaze. In those eyes, the boy glimpsed a cold confidence in the stunted, hunch-backed little man. There was no change in his physical stature, but Ordimas seemed strangely taller and stronger than he ever had before, unruffled and somehow suddenly dangerous.

‘I... I’ll take you there,’ said Nedra, though his own words shocked him. He seemed to be speaking them against his will. ‘I’ll show you, but please...’

Ordimas allowed himself a predator’s grin. It had been over a year since he’d last killed. This ill-minded oaf, this abuser of the weak, was a Nightside miner. Ordimas had his new orders: infiltrate one of the work-parties, get into the mines, and report anything of note. Fate had brought two separate threads together this day. Such moments were a gift. He flexed his fingers and rolled his misshapen shoulders. With a touch, he confirmed the presence of the short black knife in his waistband, its blade coated in a very rare and potent paralytic. With another touch, he confirmed the injector packs filled with their milky purple drug, nestled patiently in a side pouch he never removed save to make ablutions. The pouch sat on his left hip beneath the hem of his dirty, sack-cloth shirt, each tiny phial inside it worth more Imperial ducats than an entire Cholixe city block.

Readiness was ever his way. He had everything he needed. It was time for some real work.

As he herded Nedra out into the alleyway, he thought of his favourite line from a book – the only children’s storybook he had ever owned. It was a line from which he had often drawn strength and confidence in the past, especially in the

face of danger, and it was simply this:

*The smaller the scorpion, the deadlier the sting.*

## 8

‘He is superb,’ admitted Sergeant Saigan. ‘You cannot deny it.’

‘I’ve never said otherwise,’ murmured Captain Shrike.

From a balcony high in the western towers of the Ravenspire, the two Raven Guard Space Marines looked down on a training ground within the fortress-monastery’s inner wall. The subject of their conversation, a battle-brother named Siefer Zeed, was surrounded by twenty-three others, all of whom wielded blunted training weapons. They had asked Zeed for training outside the standard Chapter curriculum. Shrike knew he should have been pleased, but it rankled. In the eyes of most captains, Siefer Zeed was an unrepentant troublemaker. If only the Chapter Master agreed...

‘You cannot keep passing him over, captain,’ said Saigan. ‘Not even sergeant rank? By rights, he should have been inducted into the Wing long ago. Every soul in the Chapter knows it. How long will you set him aside?’

Shrike felt a surge of fresh irritation and forced himself to suppress it. Saigan was right, and he knew it. That was what bothered him most; he knew he had waited too long to honour Zeed. The insult had been dealt. It could not be taken back now, even had he strolled out onto the training field this very morning and reversed his position.

He gazed off into the distance, angry that things had gone this far. Far away, the barrier of the force-dome shimmered, shielding the Ravenspire from the void of space, fractionally distorting the horizon. Beyond the barrier, across that dusty grey expanse where no breathable atmosphere existed, Shrike could see another heavy transport lifting off from the freight station at Leiros, hauling freshly processed metals from Deliverance to the planet Kiavahr.

That vast orange orb wasn’t visible above the Ravenspire today. The atmospheric enclosure fields were high enough for clouds to form within, and today they had.

Fourteen hours ago, an adept from the Chapter’s communicarum had brought word of a ship seeking approach clearance. Shrike had been expecting it. Soon enough, a shuttle from that ship would descend through those clouds.

*I am committed now, but no matter. I was right to do it this way.*

Lowering his eyes again, he watched as Zeed selected three battle-brothers

from the group surrounding him and told them to attack him from each side. Then, slowly at first so the others could study his movements, he began a series of simultaneous parries and attacks that would have brutally disarmed and eviscerated his foes.

Zeed's balance and control were superb, beyond anything the Chapter had seen for long years. Shrike harboured momentary doubts that even he could stand against him. He knew he should have been proud to count Zeed among the men of his company. Yet he could not.

'I would have been glad to honour him, Saigan, if he would only follow doctrine. But he will not listen. He is rebellious, arrogant, even disrespectful at times.'

'And his brothers love him for it,' said Saigan with a half-grin on that scarred, leathery face of his. 'These below...' he said, gesturing at the crowd around Zeed. 'These are only the brothers for whom this hour is free from other duties. Many more wished they could attend, but for duty.'

'You do not help his case, sergeant. That he leads others astray is what counts against him most. He has become a problem. He should have become the Chapter's champion instead. Corax knows, he's an exceptional asset in the field. But I can't allow him to continue like this. The more his legend grows, the more he draws his battle-brothers away from the true teachings. You've seen the sensorium feeds. No sense of strategic avoidance. He throws himself headlong into any fight he can find like a damnable madman.'

A light rain began to fall now. The wind whipped at Shrike's cloth tabard. Down on the grassy training field, Zeed had finished teaching his three-foe execution pattern in slow-motion. Now he demonstrated it at full speed.

Shrike heard Saigan curse quietly under his breath.

Zeed was a dark blur. Up towards the high balcony, there came the clash of training claws on ceramite as he disabled the three brothers attacking him with zeal. The sound was all too brief. If the flow of deadly movement had taken more than a single second, it was not by much. The brothers being instructed clashed their right fists on their breastplates in awed applause. Zeed stepped out of the centre, selected one of the others to take his place, then carefully led him through the series of defensive counter-attacks.

'I've half a mind to take lessons with him myself,' grunted Saigan. He sensed Shrike tense in anger at the words, and added, 'Sorry, captain. I was just—'

Shrike raised a hand in placation. 'Forget it, old friend. If I am angry, it is with myself. I cannot help thinking I could have guided him better, that his flaws are

the result of my own failings.’

‘That cannot be so, captain. Truly, is it not always the way? The most exceptional are ever the most pig-headed and independent.’ He laughed then.

‘Without meaning offence, so it was with you. I remember Captain Thune despairing of your unruliness. In days long past, of course.’

‘Perhaps I was lucky, Saigan. Perhaps Thune was a better mentor than I have been. I tried with Zeed. I still do. But the more I try, the more he seems to rebel. I can expend no more energy on him. There are others to whom I must turn my attention. They deserve the same opportunities I have given Zeed.’

‘Then what is to be done with him?’

Even as Saigan said this, a black shape materialised, dropping into view beneath the rain-laden clouds to the far south-west. It was sleek and fast, and the roar of its engines echoed over the hills beneath the Ravenspire like peals of deep thunder.

Shrike nodded in the direction of the approaching craft.

‘For a time, at least, the problem will be out of my hands. You see that ship? There is my solution, temporary though it may prove. The Deathwatch has come for him. In truth, it is a greater honour than I can offer him here. May it quell this talk of passing him over. I see that look, Saigan. I’ll not deny it is a convenient and easy path to take. But Zeed is worthy of joining the Watch. None can argue that. May he find guidance and wisdom among brothers from other Chapters since he will not listen to those of his own. And may he return to us recast, better suited to serve among us.’

‘If he returns at all,’ said Sergeant Saigan darkly. The ease of the captain’s solution did not sit well with him. Deathwatch service ought not to be used to rid one of an inconvenience. Moreover, Saigan himself had long dreamed of such an honour. Those who returned alive were often judged the best candidates for a captaincy whenever one arose.

‘Quite,’ said Shrike, and he turned from the balcony and went inside to descend the great stone stairs on his way to meet the black shuttle.

## 9

They found the man in question just as he was leaving the square, a large brown bottle in one hand, a bag of grox cuts in the other. Ordimas marked him well: a little shy of two metres tall, notably broad and deep-chested like so many of the Nightsiders. He was thickly bearded but with a shaved head. The crude tattoo on his neck identified him as either a member or former member of the local criminal organisation known as the Rockheads.

*Meaning he can fight,* thought Ordimas, *but I wasn't planning on going toe-to-toe.*

As the brute made his way out of the square, Ordimas ordered Nedra home.

'No,' said the boy, standing firm. 'I said I'd show you. Now, let's go back together.'

Ordimas frowned. 'Lad, have I ever done ill by you?'

Nedra looked at the ground and shook his head.

'Do you take me at my word?'

'You know I do,' muttered the boy.

'Then do as I ask. Have faith in me now. I have business that you can't be part of. Not this time. So go home and wait for me. Eat. Sleep. Practise with the puppets. When I return – and I will return, though it may be a day or two – I'll want to see that you can perform Harvald's *The Smiting of the Traitor* at least as well as I. Is that understood? If you can, you'll have your first official public appearance at our next showing.'

Nedra's eyes went wide. For a long time, he had waited to perform publicly. He wanted to make Ordimas proud. His fear for the little man's safety still hung over him, but he nodded obediently and turned to go.

At the last second, he turned back and, on a whim, reached out for Ordimas and drew him into a crushing hug.

No further words passed between them, but Ordimas felt his heart breaking in that embrace, knowing that, after this last reconnaissance was done, he would have to leave the boy forever.

*I would have stayed, lad,* he thought. *Even in this dingy slum, living this pitiful false life. I'd have stayed until you were a bit older at least. But His Lordship won't allow that. I live only while I'm useful; a man owned until death.*

*I'll see you right, though, son. Mark my words. This little freak, this smallest of scorpions, will see you right.*

Nedra released him and ran off towards home at a sprint. Ordimas didn't have time to watch him go, or to dwell further on their inevitable parting. He moved off into the crowds, slipping between them like a fish between river reeds. Someone spat on his hunched-back and hissed, 'Filthy twist!', but he paid them no heed. The miner had slipped down a side-street, and Ordimas had to keep moving at speed to keep him within sight.

Out of the market square, that proved a lot easier; the alleys were thick with shadow. Most people avoided them.

The miner never noticed his diminutive pursuer. He roughly shouldered his way past anyone on his path, walking with the swagger of one who was known and feared here on his own patch. The Rockheads controlled most criminal business in Cholixe – drugs, women, weapons, smuggling, and much else besides. They were known for being ruthless and brutal; the very qualities which had allowed them to crush their competition. Even the Civitas enforcers here on Chiaro, few as there were, tolerated the gang's activities rather than wage all-out war on them. An uneasy accord existed. With their local monopoly on illicit products and services, the Rockheads had their claws deep in the Garrahym labour force. They could tilt the miners into striking if they wanted to, even rioting. The administrators and law-enforcers knew the cost of denying labourers their few, limited pleasures. So, within tolerable limits, the Rockheads prospered.

*Arrogant oaf*, thought Ordimas. *Your tattoo won't protect you from me.*

But it would pose something of a problem later.

The miner had stopped at the door of a corner hab just up ahead and was delving into his pocket for his keys. He seemed to be having trouble finding them. Ordimas checked the street. No good. There were too many people around. Best not to act in haste. Patient observation was called for here.

The miner began hammering a big fist on the door. 'Mira!' he barked over the pounding. 'Open up! I forgot my gackin' keys.'

A moment later, the door opened. The miner shoved it wide, and charged inside, cursing the woman in his way, calling her every name he could think of.

Ordimas slipped into a shadowed doorway on the right with a good view of the corner hab. The alcove was strewn with garbage and the smell from the gutters was foul, but it provided good cover. He dragged tattered papers and plastic bags over himself until he was completely cloaked from notice. And there he waited for his time to strike.

He didn't have to wait long. After forty minutes or so, voices were raised in the hab. Ordimas picked up the miner's name. The woman, Mira, was screaming it.

'Please, Mykal! Don't!'

The muffled sounds of a struggle followed. Suddenly, the hab door flew open, and a short, petite woman came racing out holding her cheek. Her clothes were torn, and she bled from one corner of her mouth. The miner, Mykal, came to the doorway and shouted after her, 'Aye, run! You can come back when you remember your gackin' place!'

Mira didn't hang around to shout back. She was already gone from the street when Ordimas rose from the cover of the shadows and the garbage. Mykal, he noticed, had slammed the door so hard behind him that the auto-lock hadn't had time to click into place. The momentum of the metal door was so great when it struck the frame that it rebounded and swung half open again.

Mykal had already retreated back inside the hab, too hasty or angry to notice, or perhaps too sure of himself to care.

Ordimas bolted across the street and slid into the hab like a shadow, leaving the door open for now, knowing that the noise of closing it might alert his target.

Once inside, he slid the short knife from its sheath at his lower back and crept forwards, feline-stealthy, down a gloomy, smoky hallway. The air smelt of mould and lho-stick residue. The wallpaper was curled and patchy with fungal growth. These people lived even worse than he and Nedra did.

*But not for long, Mykal*, he thought as he stalked towards the kitchen at the far end of the hall. He could hear grunting and grumbling over the sound of fat sizzling in a hot pan. At the doorway, he paused long enough for a split-second scan of the place. There was Mykal, alone at the hob, back towards the door like an idiot.

Ordimas gripped his knife tighter and stepped silently into the room.

*Time's up, you son-of-a-bitch. May daemons gorge on your soul.*

Mykal made a short, gasping moan when the little knife punched into his lower back. It was the last breath that ever left his lungs. The neurotoxin on the blade raced through him in an instant, shutting down each of his organs, burning through his neurons, starving his brain of oxygen.

Ordimas stepped deftly aside just in time as the big man toppled backwards stiff as a board, eyes wide open and already glassy.

The little hunchback leaned over his mark, looking down into his face from only inches away. 'You've had that coming a while, gacker,' he murmured.

There was little time to take real satisfaction in the deed. Morphosis would take an hour or so. He had to work fast. It was this moment, more than any other, that Ordimas dreaded. He knew the price he would pay later for using the drug. Taking it was bad enough, but the crash was another type of torture entirely.

Quickly, he stripped both himself and the corpse, placing everything on the floor in two piles. Taking one of the drug-capsules from its pouch, he uncapped it, pressed the tiny needle into the flesh of his chest, and crushed the flexible plastic bubble that contained the purple liquid.

The drug shot into him. He gritted his teeth, muffling a scream that desperately wanted to get out. The pain was as intense as ever, a fire that coursed along every last nerve in his body. He saw stars. His skin itched all over. He felt his heart hammering so fast he thought it would burst. But none of this was new to him. He knew it would subside.

Within three minutes it had, and the drug, acting on Ordimas's unique genetics, started to take its intended effect. Ordimas felt his joints loosen. He lay down on the floor next to the body of Mykal. His bones became less rigid. Normal breathing became difficult. He forced himself to relax and take shorter, shallower breaths, establishing a rhythm he knew would work best from past experience.

The moment was at hand. Mustering all the strength his now flaccid muscles had left, he shifted his head over to the arm of the dead miner and took a tiny bite of his flesh. He didn't need much; just some tissue, some blood, a little hair.

He swallowed, no longer sickened by this, though in his early days of service to His Lordship, he had struggled with the notion, raging at himself because he dared not refuse. Not so now. One small bite was all he needed. That hardly made him a cannibal.

The changes in his body took a new direction almost at once, guided not just by the intake of genetic material but by his eidetic imprint of how the man had looked when alive. He closed his eyes, holding that image of Mykal in vivid detail, knowing the process couldn't be rushed. It was always better to lie back and let it happen.

Fifty-eight minutes later, two near-identical bodies lay on the kitchen floor of that dirty corner hab; two men of thick muscle and bearded face. Of the original Ordimas Arujo, there was no sign left save the pile of humble clothes, the knife and the drug pouch. Two bodies, but only one stretched and rose to its feet:

Ordimas as Mykal – puppeteer of another sort entirely.

'What shall we do about that tattoo?' wondered Ordimas aloud, testing the

qualities of his newly configured vocal cords, attempting to mimic Mykal's voice from the memory of the words the miner had hurled after his battered woman. Ordimas was trained for this, too, of course, and his mimicry was near perfect despite only hearing the mark speak clearly twice. Unique vocal habits and idiosyncrasies were something he would have to guess at, but Ordimas had observed enough of the Rockheads in bars and on street corners to know he had a feel for their patterns of speech.

Still naked, he leaned close to the cold corpse to get a better look at the tattoo. Tattoos, scars, the holes of piercings; these were things his gift alone could not mimic. He had to think of a way—

There was a crash of breaking glass to his left and the sound of a scream suddenly muffled by two hands.

Ordimas whipped his head around to face the source.

There in the kitchen doorway stood Mira, pale as a ghost, eyes wide like a panicked animal, her hands pressed tight over her mouth.

*Ashra's arse!* thought Ordimas. *I should have locked the door after the kill.*

The woman probably had her own key, of course. Still, forcing her to unlock it would have bought him valuable extra seconds. In any case, it was too late for *should-haves*; here she was, frozen in fear, then suddenly frozen no more.

She turned and bolted into the hall.

Ordimas flew after her, fighting to coordinate his new limbs as he ran.

## 10

Bolter-fire stitched the earthworks behind which Second Company held fast.

‘Get those lascannons ready!’ barked Sergeant Voss. ‘Those tanks will move up any second. I want them taken out. And someone move those bloody fuel drums. If a stray bolt hits them, we’ll all be cooked meat!’

Paradaxis, third planet of the Arcaydes system, had drawn the interest of the foul traitors known as the Word Bearers. No one knew why. They had struck suddenly, ships slipping from the warp so close to Imperial planetary defences that, within hours, the Naval Defence Monitors were overwhelmed and obliterated. Chaos drop-ships fell by the dozen, concentrating on the eastern regions of the Frajian continent, particularly around the bustling trade city Diasport.

Imperial Guard regiments garrisoning the city had dug in to offer every bit of resistance they could muster. Via both astropathic and deep space relay communications, they had sent out a desperate call for aid.

It was by chance alone that the Imperial Fists Second Company were in the subsector. They were two days out. Those two days almost ended the fight. The Guard regiments were little more than tattered remnants when the Fists arrived. Had it not been for the support of a redoubtable civilian militia determined to protect their homes and families, the city of Diasport would have fallen before the Adeptus Astartes could have made any difference.

As it was, Maximion Voss and the rest of his company, under the command of the renowned Second Captain Rudiel Straker, found themselves fighting against the clock. Whoever had designed the defences of Diasport ought to have been executed, at least in Voss’s eyes. The city’s guns were mostly on the coast, intended to prevent an attack by sea. The land to the west of the city had been given over to agriculture with little thought for effective fortification. So it was that Second Company fought from hastily constructed earthworks behind which they had dug and blasted out a complex trench network. Razor wire and tank traps added to the mix. It wasn’t much, not against the vile forces of Traitor Marines, but, given the identity of the Chapter defending the city, it was proving enough.

Once ordered to hold ground, the Imperial Fists were unrivalled. They were

the finest defensive fighters and counter-siege specialists in the modern Imperium. Voss intended to prove that.

He ran along the primary trench, heading south, his powerful legs pounding the muddy duckboards. He was unusually short for a Space Marine. In the militia, there were standard humans – *mundanes*, some of the brothers called them – who cast as long a shadow as he did. Few cast a shadow as wide, however, for what Voss lacked in height, he more than compensated for in hard, grainy muscle. There was nothing he could do about his height, and not a few of the Chapter's Apothecaries looked at him askance whenever he passed by. Perhaps it was a kind of unconscious compensation, but Voss had become prone to voluntary sessions of extreme physical training. His muscles swelled beyond their already significant gene-boosted mass. His armour had to be adjusted by the Chapter's tech-servitors. Then it had to be adjusted again, and again. Finally, he had been told – no, commanded! – to grow no thicker. His strength and power had outstripped those around him, but concerns had arisen about his mobility in the field. So far, these had not been borne out. But nevertheless, with some reluctance, Voss had acceded to the demands of his superiors. He grew no bigger and, from that moment, trained only to maintain what he had.

What he had remained formidable. As he ran to shore up a potential weakness in the southern defences, he carried not one but two portable Hellfire missile launchers, fully loaded, one in either armoured hand.

Bolter and autocannon-rounds whipped and whined over his head. To his right, the earthworks shuddered. Dirt leapt into the air to shower down on his bright yellow helmet and pauldrons. A tank round – high explosive – had missed him by a few metres only. Voss kept running. Up ahead, he could see the battle-brothers of Squad Richter pouring bolter and plasma-fire onto the kill-zone from the firing step. Suddenly, as one, they ducked. Another tank round whistled over them, smacking into the rear wall of the trench.

The brothers of Squad Richter closest to the impact threw themselves to safety barely half a second before the rear wall blasted outwards. Voss was shoved sideways by the force of another blast a second later, but he was sure-footed and steady. He did not fall, nor did he drop his armaments.

He reached Squad Richter a few seconds later. They were rising to their feet, shaking off clods of wet earth. Voss recognised a battle-brother called Varagrim, a heavy weapons specialist like himself. 'Var!' he shouted. 'Look sharp!'

He tossed one of the missile launchers and Varagrim caught it, knees bending momentarily with the weight of the weapon as it landed in his outstretched

hands.

‘With me,’ ordered Voss as he leapt up onto the firing step and put the other missile launcher to his shoulder.

Varagrim didn’t argue. Sergeant Richter had fallen to a heavy artillery barrage just two days prior. Sergeant Voss had assumed command of Squads Voss and Richter both.

Voss poked his visor up above the lip of the trench and cursed. It wasn’t any kind of conventional armoured vehicle that had fired those shots into the trench. Before him, not three hundred metres away and scuttling forwards fast, was a multi-legged metal monstrosity. Hideous, daemonic faces cast in gold and bronze leered at the loyalists, mocking them, daring them to stand and fight. And die.

‘Defiler,’ spat Varagrim, joining him on the step.

*Aye, thought Voss. Curse the luck.*

Defilers were damned difficult to disable. Knock out the treads of a tank and it became a sitting target. Easy prey. But the thickly-armoured, spider-like limbs of the Defiler were harder to hit. More than that, should one of the legs be disabled, the others could compensate, keeping the Chaos abomination mobile. If one managed to stagger it, however, there was a short window of opportunity...

‘We’ve only two missiles,’ said Voss to Varagrim. ‘I want you to target the front right leg.’

‘Surely we should both fire on the hull, sergeant!’

‘Not while it still has full mobility. Trust me, brother. The next step that monster takes, I want you to cripple that leg.’

Varagrim hesitated only a moment, then nodded.

‘As you say, brother-sergeant.’

Behind the Defiler, a squad of Chaos Marines advanced, using the walking tank to shield themselves from the fury of the defenders. If the Defiler breached the earthworks, the Traitors would spill into the trenches and all advantage would be lost. Voss was confident of his company’s strength in hand-to-hand combat, but it was a numbers game here, and the Chaos filth outnumbered his brothers by a factor of three to one.

*What in Dorn’s holy name brought these bastards here?*

Perhaps he would never know. It was enough for now that they had to be stopped.

‘Fire!’ he barked to Varagrim.

There was a shriek of igniting fuel and a bright flash of back-blast. The first

missile screamed towards the Defiler on a trail of white smoke.

It struck the leg squarely on the knee joint, staggering the unholy machine, biting off great chunks of thick armour and crippling the pistons beneath. The Defiler swayed and struggled to its articulated knees. That instant of immobility was the window Voss had been waiting for. He painted the Defiler's hull dead-centre with his weapon's targeting laser.

'Get clear,' he yelled, warning any behind him of the imminent back-blast.

He pressed the firing stud and let fly.

The launcher's tube coughed out its deadly payload, kicking hard in Voss's hands.

With a piercing scream, the missile spiralled towards its mark. There was a short, sharp boom before blinding fire erupted outwards, followed immediately by a great billowing cloud of thick black smoke. As the wind pulled the smoke aside like a great curtain, Voss saw the ruined machine collapse in the mud. A secondary explosion rocked it from inside, the walker's magazine detonating, blowing out the rest of its hull armour in a wave of deadly shrapnel that scythed into the Chaos Marines close by.

'Now,' Voss roared over the link. 'Take them!'

Along the trench, a blazing fusillade poured out towards the Traitor Marines, now wounded and exposed. Bolts punched deep into spiked armour, ruining the corrupt and twisted flesh within. Bright plasma fire arced into their ranks, burning and melting all it touched. It was slaughter. Righteous slaughter. The Imperial Fists revelled in it, feeling their blood rise.

'Sergeant Voss,' barked a stern voice on the vox-link. 'Do you read me, sergeant?'

'Captain?' answered Voss.

'You are relieved, sergeant. Fall back to Command HQ at once.'

'The battle is not over, my lord. I have much to do here. My squad await--'

'Your squad will be fused with Squad Richter for now. Brother Berren will assume command. I'm promoting him to sergeant as of this moment.'

'A good choice, my lord, but I cannot leave the field while the enemy yet lays siege.'

'You can and will, Maximion. That is an order, and you shall not disobey. Your petition has been approved. A shuttle has arrived. You are to don the black of the Deathwatch, sergeant. The honour of the Chapter must be served.'

Voss was stunned to silence, but only for a heartbeat. He had hoped, of course, but he had not dared to assume.

‘The honour of the Chapter *will* be served, captain.’

‘For the primarch, sergeant.’

‘For the primarch,’ said Voss. ‘For he and the Chapter both.’

## 11

One arm went around her waist and lifted her clear off the floor. The other snaked over her shoulder, a big hand clapping tight over her mouth before she could call out.

Ordimas caught her as she was reaching for the handle on the inside of the front door. He wrestled her back to a doorway on the left of the hall that led into a dark main room. Two stained and rickety chairs sat before a smudge-screened pict-viewer. Lho-stick butts and empty bottles littered a table on the left.

With his hand still on her mouth, Ordimas dropped Mira, the dead miner's woman, down into one of the chairs and, staying behind her, pressed his face close to her ear.

'I'm not here for you, girl,' he said softly. 'But I can't let you report what you've seen. Not until my business is done. We both know that man was cruel to you, Mira. It is Mira, right? We both know you'll be better off without him, Mira. So what I propose is this. I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to answer them. You're going to help me. And then I'll help you. I will have to tie you up when I leave, and gag you. But when my work is done, I'll contact an associate of mine. She'll come and free you. And if you do exactly as I say, and don't interfere with my plans in any way, I'll see to it you're compensated. She'll bring money, but only if you comply.'

When he told her the exact amount he would be paying her, she went rigid. Ordimas remained silent to let the significance of the amount sink in. The woman gradually relaxed.

'Good girl,' he told her. 'We both know what that money could do for you, so keep that in mind. Because you won't like the alternative. I'm good to my friends, Mira, but I'm a daemon to my enemies. I never forgive, and I never forget. Take my word on that.'

Mira nodded.

Slowly, Ordimas removed his hand from her mouth. She didn't scream.

All the same, he made sure to stay behind her for now. Seeing him naked in front of her, an almost perfect likeness of her freshly slain partner, would most probably unhinge her. Ordimas didn't need that. It was bad enough that he had to speak to her in Mykal's voice. And it was the voice that he asked her about now.

‘Do I sound like him?’

Mira made to turn and face him.

‘No,’ said Ordimas. ‘Face forwards. It’ll be easier for you that way, at least for now.’

‘H-he spoke a bit rougher than you,’ she said. ‘More rasping, sort of. Something he did by choice. He put it on to sound meaner.’

Ordimas nodded and added more gravel to his tone.

‘Like this?’

Mira gave a shudder. ‘Saints! What... what in the nine hells *are* you?’

‘Just a man,’ said Ordimas. ‘A man with a job to do. If that improves your lot, so much the better, yes?’

Mira was silent. Seconds passed before she said, ‘He cursed a lot, Mykal did. Gacking this. Gacking that.’

‘Understood. Any physical habits? Anything other Rockheads would know him for?’

Mira nodded, still facing the wall. ‘He cracked his knuckles a lot. He thought it intimidated people. He chewed that fungal stuff from the mines, too. Greywort. You’ll find some in his pockets if you check. He was always spittin’ it in the sink. Foul stuff.’

Ordimas didn’t particularly want to mimic that habit – greywort was a mild psychotropic that induced euphoria in certain quantities – but he knew he could suppress the effect if he was careful with the dose. He wouldn’t take any unless offered. He needed to be sharp for this.

‘Right- or left-handed?’ he asked.

‘Right,’ said Mira.

‘Wait here,’ he told her.

He went back into the kitchen and put on the dead man’s clothes, conscious of how different that felt to the habitual, almost automatic act of putting on his own. Then he stuffed his discarded clothes into a stinking, half-filled garbage bag, tied it shut, and jammed it in a corner beneath five or six others already filled almost to bursting. Then he put his belt, with its dagger and injectibles, around his waist and cinched it. His new waist was three notches bigger than his true waist. ‘Lucky the damned thing still fits,’ he mumbled to himself and went back through to the main room.

‘Okay, listen, Mira. I’m going to move in front of you now. I need you to keep it together, all right? I need to know everything you can tell me about his shifts, his friends, what he does in the mines, what business he’s into with the

Rockheads. I need everything you can give me, Mira. It's important. Just keep thinking about that money. I can't pay you if I don't pull this off.'

'I... I understand. I'll help you, but you better not be lying about that money.'

'I'm not,' said Ordimas. 'I'll make sure you get what you're due. Is there a quill and ink around here somewhere?'

She told him he'd find them on an old desk in the corner of the next room. Ordimas, having bound her tightly to the chair, fetched them and went to the kitchen where the miner's dead body lay cooling on the floor. With his knife, he cut the tattooed flesh from Mykal's neck, took the flesh, quill and ink to the couple's dingy bathroom, and copied the design onto his own skin. It took six minutes. Like any agent worth his salt, Ordimas had an eye for detail. The replica was near flawless.

For the next two hours, Mira coached him. He dressed in Mykal's overalls – a rough, orange one-piece thermasuit with I-8 printed on the back in big white letters. This was the man's work-party allocation, and Ordimas's primary concern was making sure the other men of I-8 sensed nothing out of the ordinary. By the end of his time with Mira, he had Mykal's identity and mannerisms down so well that the woman suddenly began to weep. Ordimas thought she might be doubting her sanity. The scene she had returned to in the kitchen would have shaken anybody's hold on reality. But it wasn't that.

'I won't miss him,' she sobbed, still tied to her chair. 'I'm glad he's dead, but I shouldn't be. It seems wrong. Especially now that...'

'Now that what?'

'Now that I'm carrying his child. He could never manage it before. Children, I mean. Then suddenly he comes home from his shift one day and it's the most important thing in the world. I never understood him.'

So there were two living beings tied to the chair – Mira and her unborn child. That was a complication, but only if Ordimas allowed it to be.

'It's not wrong to be glad, Mira,' he told her. 'No child should grow up with a man like that as a father. There're things you don't know about him. But it doesn't matter now. He's gone.'

There was a heavy knock at the front door and a gruff voice from outside, 'Time to go, Myk. Get your arse out here, brother.'

Mira started. 'That's Nordam. He and Mykal go to work together.'

'A Rockhead?' asked Ordimas.

'No. Just a co-worker.'

'Okay,' said Ordimas. 'Last chance, Mira. If I blow this, we're both gacked

and you'll never see that money. Is there anything you've forgotten?'

Mira thought hard, brow creasing. Then she found something.

'The Rockheads have a hand-sign.'

'I know it,' said Ordimas. He'd seen gang-members greet each other with it. He clenched his right fist and rapped it against the side of his skull. 'Right?'

Mira shook her head. 'It used to be that,' she told him. 'For some of them, it still is, I think. But Mykal told me they changed it.' She made a gesture with her hand – fingers splayed in twos with the thumb extended so that the hand looked like it had three digits instead of five.

'Do this and put your hand over your heart,' she told him.

Ordimas tried it. She nodded. 'That's it.'

He was suspicious. Had she changed her mind? Was this new hand-sign intended to give him away? No. Looking at her hard, using all his abilities to read people, he convinced himself that this woman was telling the truth. Mykal had abused her for Throne-knew-how-long. She wouldn't miss him. The money she hoped to gain by aiding Ordimas would buy her a new life.

More thumping sounded at the door, angry and impatient.

'Time's up,' said Ordimas, and he withdrew behind Mira's chair.

She tensed. 'You'll remember the money?' she said, voice desperate with thin hope. 'You'll remember your promise, right?'

By way of answer, Ordimas moved close behind her. He looped a powerful arm round her neck, locked his grip on his opposite shoulder, and quickly, quietly choked her to death. She barely struggled. Ultimately, she had known deep down her death was at hand. Her last thought was one of self-contempt; how could she have even remotely believed in a happy ending? When had life ever granted her a boon?

After checking for a pulse that was no longer there, Ordimas went to the front door and stepped out, greeting the broad-shouldered man on the step with a grunt. He closed the door behind himself and heard it lock, then the two men set off down the street.

There was little conversation, which suited Ordimas fine.

It was time to go to work.

## 12

Two hours ago, Karras had felt it. The pressure had eased. The voices died to a whisper, then to nothing at all. The rage and hate that had pricked the air inside the *Adonai* since it had entered the warp had finally ebbed away. The thrumming psychic resonance of the ship's Geller fields no longer intruded on his enhanced awareness. He breathed easier. Warp transit was no smooth matter for a psyker, not even an experienced Codicier of the Librarius. For most of the journey, combat rituals and relentless training had helped to focus his mind. It was as Cordatus had said: *Arquemann* felt like a part of him now, an extension of his lethal will. He had never felt as deadly as he did wielding the rune-inscribed blade. Even so, as focused as he had been, he had nevertheless remained sharply aware of the attentions of the warp's ravenous entities. They had been fixed on him for weeks as the ship sailed the tides of the immaterium.

It was only the *Adonai*'s powerful Geller fields that kept those on board safe. With the exception of the ship's Navigator and astropaths – themselves powerful psykers – the rest of the crew were far less sensitive than Karras to the chilling daemonic howls and screams of frustration, if they were even aware of the warp entities at all. Crewmen got restless, of course. They had sleepless, torment filled nights. There were more instances of argument, even flashes of physical violence. But the Geller fields had held.

Now, in the austere, candlelit chamber that was his temporary quarters, Karras sat on the edge of his stone cot, glad that the worst part of the journey was over.

A junior crewman, barely out of boyhood it seemed, had brought provisions to him here in his quarters about half an hour ago: fruit and watered wine. He had been shaking so much when Karras bade him enter that he'd almost spilled the contents of the tray. Karras grinned, remembering the speed of the boy's terrified retreat. He lifted the clay goblet to his lips.

The wine was cool and refreshing as it slid down his throat.

They were like skittish birds sometimes, these little humans. Their fear over such simple things was beyond his comprehension. A miracle they had ever set forth into space at all!

He ate some of the fruit – a platter of bright, fleshy segments, pre-skinned or peeled, from half a dozen worlds. Not exactly the right stuff to maintain a hard-

training Space Marine, but it would be back to nutrient-dense amino-porridge and triglyceride gel soon enough.

He was about to reach for another slice of black pear when, from the vox-speaker in the corner of his chamber, the voice of Captain Paninus Orlesi rang out, tinny and riddled with low static.

‘My lord passenger,’ said Orlesi. ‘Our destination is now in visual range. If you’ll meet me in the forward observation gallery, upper deck, I thought we might view it together. I think you’ll find the sight more than worthy of your time, my lord. I shall be there in ten minutes, if you’d care to meet me.’

Twelve minutes later, Karras entered the viewing gallery. It was a broad, dimly lit space with deep, luxurious burgundy carpeting. In the centre of the carpet, a golden aquila, the two-headed eagle sigil of the Imperium of Man, had been woven into the fabric. Even at a cursory glance, Karras could see that it was beautiful and extremely expensive work. So too were the rich oil-paintings that lined the walls to left and right, each highlighted in the warm oval illumination of its own wall-mounted lamp. A chandelier of pale green crystal dominated the ceiling, so low, and Karras so tall, that its polished centre almost brushed his head as he strode beneath it.

Not realising he had company, the captain stood with hands clasped behind his back, gazing out through the wide armourglass window at the gallery’s far end. Karras continued towards him, announcing himself by clearing his throat.

Orlesi turned to greet him, a smile on his florid features, teeth bright under a thick, well-oiled black moustache. He bowed. ‘My lord, I’m heartened that you decided to come. We’re on final approach. I’m sure you won’t think your time wasted.’

‘Naturally, I’m curious about our destination, captain. I would not have missed this opportunity.’

Orlesi gestured towards the window, inviting Karras to enjoy the view.

Whatever Karras had been expecting – some smaller variation of a Ramilies star fort, perhaps – it was not this.

‘Watch Fortress Damaroth,’ said Orlesi with theatrical emphasis.

*Damaroth. Centre of Deathwatch operations in the Centaurus Arm of the Ultima Segmentum.*

The actual coordinates of Damaroth were classified at the very highest level, known only to those pledged to a lifetime of service. The Space Marines seconded here only temporarily were never told exactly where *here* was. They

were brought on Deathwatch ships and they departed on Deathwatch ships. They did not need to know.

Shrouded in secrecy until now, Damaroth was at last revealed to Karras's eyes. There it sat, hanging in space, rotating slowly in a wispy nebula of greenish blue. It was a striking sight.

*A ring! A vast artificial ring around a glowing moon.*

He was silent for long moments looking at that strange place. The ring structure was black on the nightward side, its shape a curving shadow against the backdrop of the gas cloud. Countless warning and docking lights blinked in waves of red and green respectively, still tiny at this distance. The sunward extent of the Watch fortress was lit in shades of silvery grey. The outer surface seemed smooth but for the telltale shadows of huge communications pylons and the kilometre-wide dishes of the advanced auspex arrays. Karras could see no edges where blocks joined other blocks. It was as if the ring was cast or carved from a single piece.

*That's not possible. Not at this size. Cast by whom? And when?*

The inner surface of the ring, permanently facing the small bright moon in the centre, was, by contrast a study in complexity. At this range, it was hard even for gene-boostered eyes to make sense of the apparent jumble of structures there. But as Karras continued to stare in silence, and the *Adonai* crept closer, things began to resolve themselves.

'About three-and-a-half thousand kilometres in diameter,' said Orlesi. 'With a circumference of some eleven thousand. Quite something, isn't she?'

Karras had seen many wonders in a lifetime of warfare among the stars, and yet he was stunned. 'We didn't build that,' he murmured. 'Not human hands.'

Orlesi shook his head. 'Not the basic structure, no. We don't know who or what built it. We know it's old. According to Mechanicus paleotechs, it's older than any other artificial structure in the Imperium. Apart from the others, that is.'

'The others?' said Karras.

'There are six ring-and-moon arrangements like this one – six that we know of so far – each sitting somewhere out on the dark, empty rimward edges of the galaxy. With the approval and cooperation of the High Lords of Terra and the Inquisition's Ordo Xenos, Deathwatch High Command commissioned Watch fortresses to be established on all of them once the proper research was completed. Not that the tech-priests found much. As I say, the basic structure is ancient beyond human history, and it was only the basic structure that remained – no trace of the beings that made them, nor of the technologies they used. The

facilities you see down there on the inner surface are all Imperial in origin. Impressive in their own right, I'd say. Gravity is a solid one-gee throughout, with a fully breathable atmosphere. The magnetosphere and ozone layer are generated by Mechanicus facilities at the moon's poles, everything maintained at close to Terran standards. Ideal for human life. We may not have built the foundations, but I'd say we've done a damned fine job with the rest of it, what?'

Orlesi chuckled at his own understatement.

'What else can you tell me?' Karras asked, eyes fixed on the Watch fortress as it grew larger and larger in his vision.

'Not much, I'm afraid,' said Orlesi, humour giving way to thoughtfulness once more. 'I've shuttled warriors like your honoured self back and forth for almost a century in real terms, and I know little more now than I did back then.'

*Xenos hunters, thought Karras, living and training on a xenos structure. As will I.*

He felt a twinge of revulsion. Like all Space Marines, he had been psycho-conditioned to loathe all things alien. Yet none fought mankind's inhuman foes with more zeal than the Deathwatch. If they had deemed it right to utilise this structure in their interminable war, Karras could hardly argue.

'Given its size, large sections of the ring's inner surface remain unexploited. There are four massive docking facilities, each equidistant, all largely automated, equipped to rival any star port in Imperial space. Conveniently, each of the docks is named for a compass direction, giving the ring an artificial north, south, east and west. The *Adonai* has only ever dropped anchor, so to speak, in the South Dock. There are always ships coming and going, I know that much. I've seen everything from Cobra-class destroyers like this one to Overlord-class battlecruisers, all belonging to the Holy Inquisition, the Adeptus Mechanicus, or to the Watch itself. As far as the Watch's own fleet goes, I've no idea of its exact strength. At any given time, most of its ships are deployed to conflict zones or sent to serve at various Watch stations, as I expect you will be, sooner or later. And that's about all I'm privy to, I'm afraid. Or at least, all I can talk about.'

Karras could have probed further. With a flexing of his power, he could have ripped the man's entire knowledge, his every living memory, from his mind. Such a thing was within his abilities if the subject was otherwise unprepared and undefended. But the Deathwatch operated in secrecy for a reason. Karras was no hypocrite. His own Chapter held many things close to its chest. Besides, a mind-rip had other consequences; some subjects went mad, others dropped dead on the spot.

Minute by minute, the dark underside of the Ring of Damaroth swelled until it dominated the entire viewing window.

‘I’ll beg your leave now, my lord,’ said Orlesi. ‘We’re on final approach and I must return to the bridge.’

‘You have it,’ said Karras.

‘You’re welcome to join me, my lord. Or you may stay here as long as you wish. Either way, you’ll have a fine view of the docks as we come in.’

‘I shall stay here, captain,’ said Karras, ‘where I can enjoy the view in silence. I would not wish to cause any distraction on the bridge.’

‘Very good, my lord.’

Orlesi offered a last quick bow and marched from the room, leaving Karras alone at the window.

Soon after, the prow of the *Adonai* rose above the upper edge of the great ring, and the viewing gallery was bathed in the strange eldritch glow of the moon of Damaroth itself.

In that glow, Karras could see that the massive construct bristled with weapon batteries all along its length, everything from torpedo and missile tubes to las and plasma cannons of immense size, arranged so as to provide defensive fire in every conceivable direction. Karras was duly impressed. He had come here with few preconceptions, but he had never imagined that the Deathwatch might boast a facility of such incredible size and armament.

*No. Not one, but six,* he reminded himself.

The Watch, as Captain Orlesi called it, must surely have incredible wealth and resources behind it – more even than a First Founding Chapter. There were key-worlds throughout the Imperium which could hardly boast static defences of this magnitude. No doubt the facility had mobile defences too, though none were yet apparent.

The inner surface of the ring, visible to the left and right of the moon’s cloud-covered sphere, became easier to make out now. Karras noted the sharp spires and windowed domes, the crenellated towers and great buttressed walls, all of which bore the elaborate gothic craftsmanship so typical of the Imperium’s architecture. These details were not what drew his attention most, however. What grabbed him were the incredible shining pavilions that stretched for hundreds of kilometres on each of their sides. They were sprawling constructions of arched plasteel and shimmering dionite. He had seen such structures before in the wealthier cities to which he had been deployed in the past. Usually, lush gardens lay beneath, filled with flora and fauna of a bewildering variety, often

not even native to the world on which the pavilions were built. Such places were beloved of the aristocracy, an expensive indulgence which Karras actually found quite worthy since it appealed to his own inclinations towards knowledge and study. But what were such extravagant structures doing on a Watch fortress? He didn't imagine for a second that the Deathwatch indulged itself in the luxury of such botanical gardens.

The *Adonai* moved into its docking lane now, and the prow dropped once more, angling towards a gaping rectangular aperture in the ring's upper edge. Bright, flickering lights could be seen inside that space. At this distance, still many kilometres out, Karras could just make out the flanks of other, larger ships already docked there, gripped in position by a profusion of thick metal arms and magnetic clamps.

Minutes passed. The mouth of the docking bay gaped wider. It was elaborately crafted, a bas-relief of countless leering skulls worked into the metal of the aperture's broad border. In the centre of that relief was a skull far larger than the others and bearing a certain distinct difference. Karras was all too familiar with that icon. It was the skull motif of the Deathwatch, easily identifiable by the glowing red lens in its left eye socket, and the crossed bones behind it. If he was judged worthy, Karras would bear that very icon on his left pauldron.

*I am worthy. I should not doubt it. I would not have been called otherwise.*

He wished he felt as certain of that as he ought to.

To either side of the docking bay, a great statue stood guard. Each was a robed manifestation of death almost a kilometre in height, its grinning skull partly covered by a sculpted hood. Karras marvelled at the detail. Even the texture of the fabric had been worked into the dark stone. In bony fingers, the statue on the left held open a thick book. It stood posed with hollow eye sockets cast down, as if caught frozen in time, reading from stone pages. The statue on the right held the haft of a massive sword in a two-handed grip, blade pointed down, tip planted between skeletal feet. This figure's hollow gaze was turned outwards into space.

Each of these skeletal giants stood atop a plinth that jutted out from the edge of the hangar's mouth. On the plinth of the book-reading figure, the inscription read, *With strength of mind, you shall discern their weakness*. On the plinth of the sword-bearing one was inscribed, *With strength of body, you shall exploit that weakness*.

Body and mind both; ignore one and you undermined the other. Irrefutable. No warrior worth his steel could afford to forget it.

The *Adonai* shifted a fraction, imperceptibly but for Karras's heightened

senses. Her starboard thrusters flared briefly, compensating further for the ring's clockwise rotation, after which her approach vector was perfectly matched to the movement of the dock. Karras could make out smaller ships now. The inner dimensions of the docking bay staggered him. He had seen none bigger save the unrivalled facilities at the segmentum's Naval headquarters, Kar Duniash. He counted over forty ships of varying size, none much smaller than the *Adonai*. Around each craft, maintenance drones weaved a slow, shifting dance as they moved silently to and fro on jets of hot plasma. Some would stop, clamp themselves to the hull of this or that ship, and swing articulated arms into play. The bright glare of oxy-acetylene torches was everywhere. Fountains of sparks rained bright and brief.

Slow, steady and smooth, the *Adonai* passed within the great mouth of the docking bay.

Flying servitor drones swarmed out to meet the craft and assist it in coming to rest.

Orlesi's voice sounded from small speakers worked cleverly into the room's chandelier. 'All personnel brace for docking.'

The ship swung to port, and the view shifted. A mass of metal gantries and loading cranes passed by on the left and right. Cables swung from beams and junction boxes, hanging everywhere like vines in a dense jungle. Clouds of greasy steam hissed from massive wall-vents. Karras could see red-robed tech-priests and servitor slaves scurrying or trundling back and forth along metal walkways and hazard-striped landings. Huge servo-arms reached out to grasp the hull of the *Adonai*. There was a mighty clang. The ship shuddered to a halt. The thrumming of its engines faded and stopped.

It was then that Karras's eyes were drawn to a figure hovering in the shadow of a dark doorway directly in front of the ship. The silhouette was bulky, its lines describing the unmistakable shape of Space Marine power armour.

Karras was suddenly sharply aware of a fresh presence in the gallery, powerful but not hostile. It was not a physical presence, but it was projected so strongly that he almost turned to greet it, half expecting to see someone behind him.

Now he knew the figure in the dark doorway for what it was.

*Like always recognises like*, he thought.

*Welcome to Watch Station Damaroth, Death Spectre*, pulsed the presence.

*Welcome to the Watch.*

# DEATHWATCH

ACT II: THE WATCH

*'The scrying of prime futures carries with it a unique set of problems. One of the most fundamental is simply this: the mere act of attempting prophecy may alter the very futures one tries to perceive.'*

– Athio Cordatus, 947.M31

# 1

The train that carried the miners of I-8 to work was a noisy, juddering locomotive: built of black iron, windowless, twelve cars long. The first and last were engine cars, and the second and eleventh were filled with grim, barrel-chested men setting out for their twenty-hour shift. All the other cars were empty – open-topped freight wagons returning to the active parts of the mine to be refilled with raw ore for the topside refineries.

So far, Ordimas seemed to be doing fine. It helped that Mykal wasn't known for good conversation. Those others who were not Rockheads had learned not to take liberties with him, and the other Rockheads in the group – five surly, cruel-faced men all bearing the neck tattoo of the gang – had given only nods of greeting. Clearly they didn't talk about gang business in the presence of others. Ordimas sensed the silence went beyond this somehow, but he couldn't put his finger on it. There was a strange air in the passenger car, almost meditative, as if each man sat straining to hear a faint voice only he could perceive. That didn't seem natural. Not for men like these. The carriage should have been filled with rough banter, tall tales, or at least some griping about the long work-shift ahead. There was none of it.

The journey to the assigned work-site was just over two hours long with a stop of ten minutes at halfway for the massive turntable at Maddox Point to rotate them onto the proper track. Eventually, the train pulled into its destination – a grimy steel platform lined with yellow-painted loading cranes – and the side doors were hauled open. Everyone rose and took work-helmets from the overhead storage bays. Ordimas did likewise, exited the train with the rest and followed as they marched off down a gloomy, lantern-lit side tunnel of jagged black rock.

There were none of the great mining machines of the Adeptus Mechanicus here. No massive titanium-jawed monsters, no gargantuan drill-faced juggernauts. These tunnels were small and narrow, a recent excavation searching for untapped veins. The men of I-8 worked at different spots along the tunnel wall, cutting to both left and right, and there was a significant bonus for anyone who found a good score. Still, even with the prospect of a reward, the work was punishing and dangerous, and little allowance was made for accident or injury.

Nightsiders died so often in cave-ins and las-cutter accidents that the work-parties had a constant flow of rookies coming in. Ordimas would have been better off choosing a rookie to mimic instead of a *face* like Mykal, but vengeance for Nedra had driven his choice and that was something he couldn't bring himself to regret.

The shift supervisor – a big, red-faced man named Yunus, whom everyone called simply *chief* – led everyone to their positions at the tunnel wall, checked his chrono, and called out for the official start of the shift. There would be a short break in six hours.

Under cover of adjusting his safety helmet, Ordimas watched the man next to him for a few moments to see what he should be doing. This man was called Seulus and, when he caught Ordimas looking at him, he grinned, put down his las-cutter, and came over.

Ordimas forced himself to relax. So far, scowling and keeping to himself had been enough. He hadn't aroused any suspicions, but all it might take was one wrong word.

Seulus stopped beside him, leaned in close, and said, 'Soon, brother. Soon.'

He made the hand-sign the miner's woman had mentioned back in Cholixe.

Ordimas limited his response to a nod and mirrored the sign, fingers splayed in twos, hand over heart. The other miner seemed satisfied.

'The chief will be round in an hour for us,' said Seulus. The other work-party are about twenty minutes from here. Section C. Not far. Just be ready.'

'I'm always ready,' Ordimas grunted back. The voice was Mykal's. He just hoped the words were something Mykal would have said. Evidently they were, because Seulus snorted derisively like he'd heard them a thousand times. Then, he went back to his downed las-cutter, lowered his goggles, hefted it and got to work burning into the rock with its blinding beam.

Having seen enough to at least look like he knew what he was doing, Ordimas hefted his own cutter, lowered his goggles, and followed suit. The cutter soon got hot, and the constant vibration numbed his hands so that he had to take small breaks every five or six minutes to shake feeling back into them. This wasn't a problem unique to Ordimas. Seulus, he was glad to see, was forced to do the same.

Before long, the chief appeared, marching towards them from the far end of the tunnel with a promethium lantern in his right hand and something dark and indistinct gripped in his left.

He gestured for Ordimas, Seulus and two others from further up the tunnel to

gather round. Eyeing each of them intently, he told them, ‘Everything is ready, kindred. We’ll go by autocart. Once we get to Section C, I want you two to block the far end of the tunnel.’ He said this to Ordimas and Seulus. ‘Zonnd and Brinte will block the near end. The others will attack with me. Be ready to take down anyone who tries to break away. Understood?’

Ordimas saw by the lamplight that the black object in the chief’s hand was a stun-cudgel, enforcer issue. What was this man doing with a Civitas-grade weapon? One did not come by such things accidentally. Enforcers were nothing if not careful with their gear. The punishments for any losses were severe.

Each of the men around the chief nodded their understanding. Supervisor Yunus thumbed the activation rune on his cudgel and it hummed softly to life. Having checked the weapon’s charge, he thumbed it off again. ‘Time for the real work to start. Follow Brinte here to the autocarts. I’ll gather the others.’

Brinte turned, and led the way while the chief went off to brief the rest of I-8. Ordimas kept a wary eye on those around him as he followed.

*What in the Eye of Terror is going on here?* he asked himself. *Why are we going to attack another work-party?*

Whatever the reason, it looked like His Lordship had thrown Ordimas Arujo into deep water once again.

As always, it was up to Ordimas to get himself out of it alive.

## 2

At the edge of the plasteel walkway by which the *Adonai* had settled, Captain Orlesi and Karras gripped wrists. The smaller man's eyes shone with a level of emotion that surprised the Death Spectre.

'Fight well and hard, my lord,' Orlesi said emphatically. 'Don't have the old girl and I ferry you back to Occludus in an onyx box, will you? I ask that with all my heart.'

*Like Brother Stephanus, thought Karras. I must not forget. I must not be complacent. Stephanus was mighty among us. And yet, he did not survive all the Deathwatch demanded of him.*

In his mind's eye, he saw Athio Cordatus glaring at him, demanding he serve with honour and survive to return home.

*Watch over me, khadit. If even Stephanus was not equal to the tasks set him, how can I hope to be?*

Karras offered the captain a wan smile. 'May the Emperor light your way, captain,' he said, 'and may the winds favour you.' It was an archaic phrase Karras had heard spoken before among parting Naval officers. He could see that it surprised Orlesi to hear it now, but the look of surprise was soon replaced by one of appreciative pleasure. Karras released the man's wrist and turned. Followed by a train of baggage servitors from the ship, he strode out to meet in body the Deathwatch Librarian who had already welcomed him in mind.

Marnus Lochaine of the Storm Wardens Chapter was not just any Librarian, as Karras soon learned. He was Chief Librarian of Watch Fortress Damaroth, a member of the Watch Council and the supreme authority governing the Librarians sent to train here. It was Lochaine who would oversee the special training each psychic Space Marine would undertake above and beyond the standard xenos hunter programme. It was Lochaine's assessment that would alter the fate of each, at least in the short term. But these were details Karras discovered only later. At the moment of their meeting, Lochaine was one more unknown in a day filled with them.

Behind the Storm Warden, a row of twelve smartly attired male serfs appeared, standing to sharp attention. These were members of the Rothi – the order of menials that served the brothers of the Watch. Each wore a smooth mask of

white porcelain, the Deathwatch icon emblazoned in silver at the outer corner of the left eyehole. As Lochaine briefly introduced himself to the new arrival, the Rothi stood in silence, shoulders back, eyes front, chests out. They were dressed in crisp, black two-piece uniforms and boots, military in appearance, with a broad grey belt. In this and in their austere military bearing, they were all identical, but their similarities to each other went beyond that. They were indistinguishable from each other in both height and build. Masked as they were, they could not be told apart. Karras let his mind reach out a psychic tendril and sent it flickering over their auras.

*Clones, he thought. Can it be? They're prohibited throughout the Imperium. Does the Watch have a special dispensation?*

It was hardly the time to ask. Lochaine was looking at him expectantly. Karras made his formal introduction and passed the other Librarian an official scroll of secondment bearing the seal of his Chapter. Lochaine nodded as he read it, then rolled it up and handed it to one of the Rothi with instructions to deliver it to the Watch Commander. With formal introductions over, Lochaine directed six of the Rothi to take Karras's effects to his new quarters. These quarters, Karras was told, were located far above the docking bay in a chapel-barracks on the inner surface of the great ring. The remaining six Rothi he instructed to attend Captain Orlesi, who stood waiting patiently at the ramp to his ship, quietly observing the proceedings from afar.

As Karras watched the Rothi silently obey, his eyes caught movement on the far right. Dark, power-armoured figures were boarding a sleek, black Sword-class frigate some distance away.

Lochaine followed the Death Spectre's gaze.

'Scorpion Squad,' he said simply. 'Still at full strength, by Terra's blessing.'

'Where are they going?' asked Karras.

'Deployment details are classified as standard. Only the Watch Council and the squad itself have access to that information.'

Karras cursed. What was he thinking? This wasn't Logopol.

'You'll get used to all the cloak-and-dagger soon enough,' said Lochaine. 'I once stood in your place. Can't say I liked it much either – all the silence, the blank stares, the evasion and the half-truths. Reasons enough for it, as you'll come to see, but it takes a little faith at first. Come, brother. There are matters to settle before you can see your quarters.'

He turned and led Karras away from the South Dock. Behind them, the Sword-class Frigate carrying Scorpion Squad began its departure, engines roaring with a

noise like unrelenting thunder. As Karras and Lochaine moved into a corridor, a thick bulkhead door rolled shut behind them and the noise of the departing craft died to a low rumble.

While they walked, Karras cast his mind back, searching for what he knew of the First Librarian's parent Chapter. It was not much. He had heard very little of the Storm Wardens. Prior to this moment he had never met one, nor could he recall mention of them in Imperial archives or oral legends. His thoughts lingered on that a moment. The glories of most Chapters quickly became tales of legend, often wildly embellished, that spread like wildfire among the Imperium's civilian populations. Who had not heard, for example, of the great Battle for Macragge, or the legendary First and Second Wars of Armageddon? Of the Gildar Rift and the Purge of Kadillus? What child did not grow up dreaming of life as a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes? Ironic, then, that the arrival of Space Marines heralded bloodshed and death on a scale of which few mortals could conceive even in nightmare. Not many civilian witnesses lived through that reality.

Space Marines went where needed, where the cancers that ailed the Imperium were most malignant. The trillions who eagerly devoured tales of the legendary warriors were the lucky ones, living safe lives, spared the truth, content to worship their heroes in blissful ignorance. Their simplistic view was something the lords of the Imperium gladly encouraged, for such tales – even the vast number of fictional ones – were a beacon of hope in these darkest of times. The absence of any such tales about a given Chapter usually spoke of deliberate suppression and secrecy. What, if anything, did the Storm Wardens hide?

*Nothing like the Shariax, I'll wager.*

Secretive or not, as they walked and talked, Karras found it easy to like the First Librarian. In the Storm Warden's eyes, he found little sign of judgement. If Lochaine bore any prejudices, he hid them well enough. It was not always so. Other Chapters, most especially those formed from the much-lauded Ultramarines gene-seed, tended to look askance at those bearing the mark of genetic mutation. The bone-white skin and hair and the all-red eyes of the Death Spectres marked them at once as having a flawed melanchromic organ<sup>[9]</sup>. Less outwardly obvious was the absence of a functioning mucranoid<sup>[10]</sup> and Betcher's gland<sup>[11]</sup>. His own lack of these advantages bothered Karras not at all, for he had never known them. If it bothered anyone else, let them stand apart as they pleased.

Lochaine was pale-skinned himself, but he was no albino. He had a thick,

heavy brow and dark, deep set eyes above tattooed cheeks and a jaw covered with short, dark stubble. He looked rough and unruly to Karras, far from the noble and austere image projected by Athio Cordatus. But Karras could sense his power, that fierce, bright aura betraying an immense force held in supremely well-exercised control. Lochaine's power was equal to his own at least. Perhaps even a degree greater.

Having taken a sequence of turns, the two Librarians now marched along a gloomy stone tunnel. It was broad and high-ceilinged, the walls cold and wet, and the stonework was unadorned by any decoration. It was a dank place, lit every five metres or so by lumes in the ceiling that cast pools of milky white light in the damp air. 'We're in the mid-levels,' Lochaine told him. 'There are coolant pipes in the walls. Moisture tends to gather.'

'How many levels are there?'

Having asked, he suddenly wondered how far questions would be tolerated. Was it anathema to seek knowledge here? Operating in shadow outside the walls of the Watch fortress was one thing, but how much curiosity would be tolerated within? Plausible deniability was critical to an organisation like the Inquisition's Ordo Xenos, with whom the Deathwatch worked so closely. The Ordo often sanctioned actions about which the greater part of humanity must never know. The most terrible and controversial of these was Exterminatus – the absolute eradication of all life on a given world. Open knowledge of this recourse, and of just how regularly it was deemed necessary, could split the Imperium like an axe. Fear would turn to panic, which might cause outright revolt. From there, it was a small step to galactic civil war and to bloodshed the likes of which had not been seen since the horrors of the mad Ecclesiarch Goge Vandire. No. The less that was known, the better. But it was more than simple deniability. The alien enemies of the Imperium were legion, and among them were cruel and ancient intellects to rival mankind's best. Any information about the Deathwatch could conceivably be seized upon and utilised for strategic gain.

Karras well understood the necessity for *need to know*. He just had to find the boundaries.

Lochaine laid some of them out for him.

'There are three hundred and twelve levels in total, the uppermost being the first. It's the first that we Space Marines mostly keep to. Everything we need is there, save the hangars and docking bays. Do not be hesitant to ask questions, brother, so long as they are the right questions. The Deathwatch operates entirely unlike any other Chapter in the Imperium. Make it easier on yourself. Abandon

your preconceptions. Empty your cup so that it might be filled anew.'

'The brothers who returned to Occludus alive would tell me nothing,' said Karras.

Lochaine nodded. 'I'm sure they wanted to, but everyone who *dons the black*, as we say, becomes honour-bound, sworn by oath to say nothing of their time among us. That's not to mention the hypno-induction, too, of course.'

'And not just for the Space Marines,' said Karras, thinking now of Captain Orlesi.

Lochaine picked up on the direction of his thoughts. 'The captain is a good man. He knows well the limits of his business. But you're right. We don't gamble on honour and loyalty. He has undergone hypno-induction, though it's a far more dangerous and unpleasant experience for a normal man.'

The dank tunnel through which they walked soon terminated in a wide archway. Beyond it, they entered a chamber with a ceiling twice as high as that of the corridor. Each of the walls to left and right boasted an entrance to a wide elevator, though neither were currently waiting at this level. In the far wall, the archways to two other corridors led deeper into the complex. Two large ventilator fans turned lazily behind their grilles in the ceiling, the lumes behind them throwing the shadows of the rotating blades down onto the stone floor below. Everything was stained dark by age and moisture. Lochaine strode forwards, stopping at a wall-embedded servo-skull by the elevator on the left. 'Summon,' he barked at the age-browened skull. In the skull's left socket, a light winked from red to green, acknowledging the command. In a small screen below the skull, numerical runes began counting upwards from six.

As they waited, Lochaine turned serious.

'You'll forgive the necessity, brother, but I must now give you the same warning I give all who are selected for the honour of serving. You see, Damaroth is not like any fortress-monastery you'd care to name. Tensions run high here. Rivalry is common and old grudges between Chapters often bear out. Unworthy infighting is all too common. Only the truly exceptional are seconded to the Deathwatch, and that makes for a lot of egos, a lot of pride. Don't mistake me. You seem well grounded. But there are plenty of others who insist on making things more difficult than they ought to be. I ask you not to rise to provocation. These others... Their minds will be tempered in time, but hunger for glory and honour is rife. To be certain, it has its time and its place, but that is not here at Damaroth. Focus only on what matters. Do your Chapter proud. Unlock your potential. There is so much for you to learn. Put your trust in us, do as ordered,

and you shall see.’

‘I came here to honour my Chapter,’ Karras told him, rankled somewhat at the tone and nature of the warning, despite its worthy intention. ‘To honour my Chapter and to serve the Imperium. I intend to do both to the limits of my ability. I did not come here for self-glorification or personal satisfaction. Let your mind rest easy on that.’

Lochaine noted the suppressed anger in Karras’s voice. ‘Do not be offended, brother. As I say, it is a speech I make to all who come, regardless of integrity and origin.’

There was a chime and a toneless voice emanated from the elevator servo-skull.

‘Level sixty. Stand clear.’

‘Forgive me for what happens next,’ said Lochaine.

‘What?’

Suddenly, Karras felt a tremendous force suppressing his psychic power and locking his muscles tight. At once, he fought back, but he had been caught off guard. Though he strained, grunting with effort, he could not move. He glared at Lochaine and saw the Chief Librarian’s eyes burning with white flame. This was balefire, also known as witchfire, the ethereal flame that ignited whenever a Librarian exercised his true strength.

‘Damn you,’ Karras barely managed through clenched teeth. ‘What—’

The elevator doors drew open and a single Space Marine stepped out, dressed in the black armour of the Deathwatch with the winged-helix icon of the Apothecarion on his right knee-guard.

He looked Karras up and down. ‘So this is the Death Spectre,’ he said; his voice was somewhat nasal. ‘Fearsome looking, isn’t he? Mark those red eyes.’

‘Get it over with, Asphodal,’ said Lochaine.

The Apothecary marched to Karras’s side and raised a pistol-like device to his neck. Karras felt several needles pierce the skin below his left ear.

‘Put your faith in us, brother,’ said Asphodal. ‘We mean no harm, no offence. All arrivals must endure this. A little undignified, perhaps, but you will understand the need for it soon enough.’

Karras was hardly listening. His blood roared in his ears. He was here to serve with honour. This was a grave insult, an outrage he would not forget nor soon forgive. Had he been able, he would have smashed his forehead into the face of the Apothecary and blasted Lochaine with balefire of his own.

He was a Death Spectre, damn it!

The Apothecary pulled a trigger. There was a sharp hiss and a strange sensation of simultaneous freezing and burning that spread from Karras's neck throughout his entire body. Darkness fell over him. How could this be? He was a Space Marine. His body had been engineered to overcome any known paralytic drug.

Dimly, he felt his centre of balance shift. Strong hands caught him.

Before darkness descended fully, he heard two voices speaking close to him one more time.

'Throne curse that we have to do this. He'll hate us for it.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Because I did.'

### 3

No one should have been here. This was an old section of the Underworks known as the Arraphel mine. Rich in its day, it had been abandoned over three hundred years ago, its thick, branching veins of precious ore utterly stripped. Silent and dark it had lain since then, frost riming the long-unwalked tunnels, but it was not silent and dark now. Ordimas rode in the last of three autocarts that trundled noisily along the dusty tunnel floors. The unconscious forms of the H-6 miners lay before him on the deck of the cart, ringed by the men who had assaulted them. The victims lay heaped together, wrists and ankles bound, mouths gagged. Looking down at the slumped forms, Ordimas's thoughts returned unbidden to Mira. He searched his feelings for guilt, and was glad to find none. He knew the type well enough. She'd only have found herself another abuser... and she would have talked. Eventually, people always did. Granting her a quick, painless death, that had been a mercy. Or was he merely justifying his actions? How many had he killed in his lifetime? Close to a hundred now, he guessed, and each so that he might get the job done. His Lordship cared not about deaths in such trivial numbers. His game, after all, was played out on a much grander scale.

He turned his eyes from the victims on the autocart floor to the men seated across from him. He still couldn't work it out: the silent almost drone-like behavior of the rest of Mykal's crew, making it almost too easy to pass for Mykal among them; the stun-cudgel assault on the other mining party; this grim, silent convoy into a long-ignored part of the mine.

*What in the blasted warp are we doing here? What's going on?*

An entire work-crew, kidnapped, loaded up, and driven down here to these mined-out branches! Ordimas scabbled to make sense of it. He knew he was in great danger. Raised adrenaline levels would have told him as much, even if the prickling of his neck hairs and the goose-bumps on his skin hadn't. The dour, uncommunicative behaviour of his fellows was a blessing, now as before. No probing questions, no awkward conversations that could have tripped him up. But the strange silence still made him feel deeply uneasy, and the men trussed up at his feet, like pigs bound for the cook-fire... that was more unsettling still.

He caught one of the I-8 crew, Nendes, looking at him. They locked gazes for

a second. Ordimas nodded in silent acknowledgement. Nendes nodded back and raised his hand to his chest in the three-pronged salute. Ordimas copied it as before. What did it mean? Not so much as a flicker of human emotion showed on Nendes's face, but his gaze moved on, and Ordimas breathed a shallow sigh of relief.

*Whatever happens, he told himself, whatever you see, don't give yourself away. Be steady. Maintain the mask. Maintain the mask.*

Despite years in the service of His Lordship, who wielded almost holy authority in the Emperor's name, Ordimas didn't really believe in the Emperor of Mankind. Most people, he suspected, didn't really believe. Hope and belief were often mistaken for each other. In the cold light of day, all he could rely on were his wits and his skills. It was these that had gotten him through all those times he'd been sure he would die. It was these that he turned to now, knowing he had to be ready for whatever lay ahead.

At that moment, what lay ahead was a massive plasteel door some ten metres across. Supervisor Yunus, riding the first cart in the line, stood and raised his hand for the others to halt. The autocarts rolled to a growling stop in a line facing the plasteel door. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, two men in enforcer uniforms stepped into the cart headlights. They wore helmets and carapace armour, and in their gloved hands, each brandished a lethal wide-bore riot-gun. These they levelled at the men on the first cart.

'Unity,' the one on the left called out.

It was Yunus who spoke in reply.

'The gift of the Master.'

'Strength,' challenged the guard.

'And life everlasting,' said Yunus.

The guard lowered his riot-gun. 'In whatever form that be.' Saying this, he nodded to his companion, who also lowered his weapon.

'Your group is the last to arrive,' said the one on the right. 'You have new kindred?'

Yunus nodded and gestured to the bodies heaped on the carts behind him. The guard moved down the row of idling vehicles, inspecting the haul of victims that lay in the back of each. When he got to Ordimas's cart, he nodded approvingly. He looked up, directly at Ordimas, and said, 'They will soon awaken to the blessings of the Master.'

Ordimas thought it deathly unwise to speak at that moment, so he nodded once, face impassive, and returned his gaze to the slumbering victims.

The guard walked back to his companion at the metal door. 'All is well,' he said.

The other guard then walked to the wall and struck a number of runes on a dark panel there. Ordimas wondered how he could see them in such low light. The headlamps of the carts lit the area immediately in front of them, but nothing else. Then it occurred to him that these men had been standing here in utter darkness for... How long? Ordimas could see clearly in the dark thanks to the opticom aug sitting in his right eye socket. Watching the man at the panel, it suddenly became clear that these guards could see just as well. Someone had augmented them, too? Who? That kind of upgrade was well beyond the reach of some backwater Civitas precinct. Who had supplied the augs? Who were these men? If they were enforcers, what in nine hells were they doing down here in the freezing darkness?

New kindred, the man had said. More than anything, it was those words that made Ordimas's skin truly crawl. These people sounded like cultists.

The tunnel began to shudder as the vast doors slowly split apart. More darkness lay beyond. After thirty seconds or so, the doors finally ground all the way back into their housing, and the way ahead lay open.

The guard on the right ushered the carts forwards now, and Ordimas swayed a little as his vehicle started into motion.

As his cart rumbled past the enforcers, he looked down and tried to read the name and number embossed on the golden badge worn by the one on the right.

*Cartigan. 899-00-213.*

Was this man really Enforcer Cartigan? Or was the uniform stolen?

It wouldn't be hard to find out, if he ever got out of here. He had hacked the local Civitas cogitator mainframe a number of times over the last year on the orders of His Lordship. He would look up this Cartigan. Maybe he was listed as missing.

*If I get out.*

As if in answer to that thought, the plasteel doors ground shut behind him with a deafening clang.

The carts rolled on. The tunnel was wide here. It curved slowly down to the left. It seemed to go quite a distance, half a kilometre at least, before another source of light could be seen up ahead. Another five minutes and the convoy emerged into a wide chamber dimly lit by grox-oil lamps that cast everything in pale, flickering orange.

In the centre of the chamber, two broad lift shafts plunged down into the

abyssal black depths. The lift platform on the left was raised, already here in the chamber, waiting to take the new arrivals to Arraphel's lowest levels. The shaft on the right gaped open, its platform waiting at the bottom, and no light shone upwards from within it.

*We're going deep*, thought Ordimas with a lurch in his stomach. He struggled with an overwhelming urge to turn, leap from the cart, and run from here. He had come this far on experience, grit and cool nerves, but the very idea of descending these shafts with these people made him blanch.

*I'm terrified*, he admitted to himself. *Something is down there, waiting, and I'm not going to like it. Throne help me, if something goes wrong, if I'm discovered, if the mask slips...*

He was already well beyond the point of no return. He acknowledged that now. There was nothing he could do. He had to ride this out, see where it led, and hope to Holy Terra that he lived to breathe the open air again.

Yunus barked out more orders and, one by one, the carts all rumbled in an orderly fashion onto the open lift platform. Even with all three vehicles, there was plenty of room to spare. Then the chief jumped down from his vehicle, walked to the control console at the platform's edge, and tapped a code into its lambent green runeboard.

Ordimas heard gears grind to life in the shaft walls and, with a violent judder, the platform began its long descent.

There were work-lumes set in the shaft walls, as there were with most shafts in the Underworks, but they were not lit. Apart from the headlamps of the carts, the only light Ordimas could see now was the square of orange above him at the top of the shaft.

As the minutes of slow descent stretched out and the pressure in his ears gradually increased, he looked straight up, watching that square become smaller and smaller, and with it, his hopes of getting out alive.

Karras awoke to a hammering pain in the back of his head and neck. He opened his eyes to find himself in a lumen-lit room, measuring, he estimated, about eight metres on each of its sides. His vision was blurry at first, but it soon sharpened. He was not alone. Across from him, seated in a high-backed chair of grey stone, was a large Space Marine in black fatigues.

*Lochaine!*

The Chief Librarian was less imposing out of armour, but not by much. That didn't stop Karras. He surged forwards without thinking, pinning Lochaine to the back of his chair with his left hand while his right hovered before the Storm Warden's throat, fingers rigid, poised to strike a blow that would crush the other's windpipe.

'What did you do?' raged Karras. 'What in damnation did you do to me?'

Lochaine sighed. 'Sit down, brother. You won't spill blood here.'

For a moment, they stayed like that, the Death Spectre frozen in his confusion and rage, the Storm Warden quietly waiting, face impassive.

It was then that realisation dawned. It hit Karras like a thunder hammer. Always before, when rage had overtaken him, his gift had risen, the flow of power boiling up to meet his violent needs.

Not so now.

It was this, as much as the truth in Lochaine's words, that forced Karras back into his own stone chair. His alabaster face retained its murderous snarl, but rage had already given way to grave concern. Why had his talent not manifested?

Lochaine knew.

'We had no choice,' he told Karras. 'It is always the way with the Librarians who come. Do not feel that you have been singled out. I endured the very same when I first arrived here, and I raged as you do, but I soon saw the need.'

'You... you have sealed my power?'

Karras's blood ran cold. For as long as he could remember, the gift had been with him, guiding him, protecting him, setting him apart from other men, even from other Space Marines.

Athio Cordatus had told him to cleave to self-image in times of doubt. But Karras's self-image was inextricably woven to the witching ways that made him

such an asset to his noble order.

‘You must understand the nature of this organisation,’ Lochaine continued. ‘Space Marines from hundreds of Chapters are pledged to serve the Watch with honour. Every last brother who dons the black is desperately needed. Promises must be made. And once made, kept. Every Chapter has its secrets, Death Spectre.’ The emphasis on those last two words could not be missed. But Lochaine couldn’t know anything. Like he said, every Chapter had its secrets. That didn’t mean he knew what they were.

‘The powers we yield could be used to pry them from a brother’s mind. I won’t insult you by spelling out what that would mean to the Deathwatch. It cannot be permitted. Long ago, compacts were made. The Deathwatch assures as much confidentiality as it asks. Until you have taken Second Oath, your psychic power must be suppressed.’

As Lochaine spoke, Karras focused inwards, desperately searching for the least remnant of his power that might remain to him. It was there, a muted flickering of eldritch energy deep within him, like a raindrop where once had blazed a lake of fire, so far removed from the glorious flow he had known that he almost cried out in despair.

‘This... I...’

Lochaine leaned forwards, forearms resting on his knees. ‘Be patient with us, brother. You will see in time that we do this not only to preserve the accords, but for your benefit also. We Librarians are ever too dependent on our gifts. You’ll gain much from training without. You’ll rediscover what it’s like to fight with only physical strength. Before your deployment, the warp-field suppressor will be fully removed.’

Karras tried to isolate and locate the source of the pain in his head and neck. He stretched a thickly muscled arm over his head and reached back, feeling the base of his skull, the back of his neck, tracing his spine as far down as he could. That wasn’t very far. The muscle mass of his shoulders and biceps meant he could not reach lower than the centre of his trapezius. It was, however, enough. His fingers brushed cold metal.

‘We graft them to the spine. Easily removed with the proper rituals when the time comes, but don’t try to pull it off yourself. Permanent paralysis won’t help your fighting abilities.’

‘It’s not just a suppressor, is it?’ Karras growled.

‘Sharp, brother. Keep thinking like that and you might just make it to the end of your term alive. No, it’s not just a suppressor.’

‘So all those seconded here receive implants?’

Lochaine nodded. ‘Standard procedure. A tracking device with a neural interrupt. It’s how we keep order here, enforce the boundaries and such. There is much in the archives here at Damaroth that is classified at the highest levels, information of a nature that, if leaked, could destabilise the treaties and accords that hold the Imperium together. The Deathwatch is ancient, Karras, and the scrolls and datacores collected here record countless things best forgotten.’

To this, a more bullish Space Marine might simply have said, *Destroy them!*

Not so a Librarian. Not Lyandro Karras. To a Librarian, knowledge was its own justification, and as vital to victory as a keen blade and a loaded bolter.

*Those who stick their heads in the sand find only the darkness of ignorance. Shy not from the horror and shame of the past. The hardest memories teach the strongest lessons.*

When had his khadit told him that? Long ago. A century now. It was as true as it would always be. Karras could see the need to track battle-brothers while they remained at the Watch fortress. That did not make the method any less insulting.

‘The implant will shut off muscle control should you try to breach a restricted area. You’ll drop, as limp as an empty sack, until a Watch sergeant issues the override command. Likewise if a fight gets a little too intense. We can’t have Space Wolves and Dark Angels killing each other.’

‘You could have asked, Storm Warden,’ hissed Karras. ‘Had you explained, I would have complied.’

‘And what if you had not? Do you think we could just ship you home? No. I told you, Karras. The Watch needs every last Space Marine it calls upon. Would that we could take more. Trust is a luxury few can afford in this Imperium. And we don’t have time to build it. So we no longer ask. We do what we must. Do you imagine we could negotiate the use of such implants with a White Scar? A Black Templar? It was tried. That we resort to such extremes ought to tell you how well *that* played out.’

Karras cursed. To be tracked like an animal... To be robbed of his gifts and forced to train without the power he had always commanded...

Things were not as he had imagined them to be. Where was the honour in this? *Stephanus. How did you react? Were you as indignant as I?*

Whether Stephanus had railed against his own implant or not, he had remained to serve for over thirty years with great pride. He had brought glory to his Chapter. Indignant or not, Karras could do no less.

‘You believe the end justifies the means, Brother Lochaine. Very well. Your

judgement is better informed than mine. But it is a bad start for us, as it must be with the others.'

Lochaine shrugged. 'As I said, I felt the same way. I got over it. You will, too. Your training will begin tomorrow at 0200 hours. From that moment forth, you will have precious little time to dwell on injured pride.'

Lochaine rose from his stone chair. Karras did likewise.

'Within the hour, that pounding in your head will dissipate. You will quickly cease to notice the physical presence of the implant. The absence of your gifts will bother you as much as you let it. Try to remember that it's only temporary.'

He turned to leave, but Karras stopped him.

'Tell me, brother,' he said. 'How is it done? Among my own, my power was considered great. I needed no psychic hood. On the battlefield, I burned my foes to ash with the white fire of the soul.'

'It will be great again,' said the Storm Warden, 'when the time is right. As to the method – like so much else here, that is not for you to know.'

He walked to the chamber door, big shoulders rolling. The doors slid apart before him, but, as he was about to step through, Lochaine stopped and spoke over his shoulder.

'I will call for you in one hour, Karras. Wear the robes we have prepared for you. They are lying on your cot. You will receive First Induction from the Watch Council today.'

Karras said nothing.

'After induction,' continued Lochaine, 'things will change. For the duration of your service, you must be Deathwatch first and a Death Spectre second. I know how that sounds. I remember how it sounded to me. But come to terms with it quickly, for your own sake. Only in this way shall you earn glory for your Chapter. So it is with all who honour the ancient accords.'

Karras stared at Lochaine coldly. It seemed impossible to think that way. A Death Spectre second? His mind rebelled, offended by the mere notion.

Yet his secondment could work no other way.

*It will be hard. Throne, will it be hard.*

'One more thing,' said Lochaine. 'You should know that the moment these doors close behind me, the soft gloves come off. Do not forget that I am Chief Librarian here. You are subordinate to me for a reason. From this moment forward, you will address me in the manner to which I am entitled. You will address me as *my lord*. Is that clear, Codicier?'

Karras stiffened. Lochaine's voice was sharp with command.

‘Crystal clear,’ he said, then added after the briefest pause, ‘my lord.’

‘One hour, Karras. Be ready.’

Lochaine strode out and the steel jaws of the chamber doors crunched shut behind him.

Karras turned and surveyed his new quarters. Small. Simple. Spartan in the extreme. *Good.*

There were recesses in each wall, waist high from the floor, each bearing a small bronze figure – icons of death like the ones at the entrance to the great docking bay. Apart from his simple stone cot, there was a black granitwood bookshelf stocked with approved texts, and a marble font filled with clear, ice-cold water. To the left and right, stone archways led into two antechambers. In one of these, Karras found the force sword *Arquemann* and the few personal effects he had been allowed to bring, one of which was the oldest known copy of Belvedere’s *Tribulatus Terrarum* – a fine, if somewhat dramatised account of the political events that led to the Schism of Mars.

*Arquemann* had been mounted on the wall. Beneath it, on a black iron rack, one of the Rothi had lit votive candles. He had recognised the sword’s relic status. Karras silently approved.

He reached out a hand to *Arquemann*’s hilt, whispering to the sword.

‘Deathwatch first? They ask too much. My death in battle, this I offer freely for the honour of the Megir. An eternity of service, never again to see the domed mausoleums and polished crypts of Logopol? Even this I would endure. But the Chapter I will always put first.’

*Even before the Imperium*, he admitted to himself guiltily.

He half expected the spirit of the force sword to flare in response. In their time training on the *Adonai*, the blade had joined its power to Karras’s just as his khadit had said it would, reacting to the strength and sense of honour within the warrior’s soul. How would it react to this last, less-than-honourable thought?

Karras felt nothing from the haft. He moved his fingers to the keen shimmering edge of the blade itself. Still nothing.

*Damn them.*

In sealing his power, they had cut him off from the soul of the ancient weapon. He almost lashed out, almost struck his heavy fists against the wall. But he mastered himself. It took a moment, but he did it. With a growl, he turned from the antechamber and went to investigate the other.

In the second antechamber, he came upon a sight that doused the fires of his frustration.

It was a gloomy, candlelit room, but bright enough to his enhanced eyes. On every wall was hung polished, resin-coated alien skulls and strange helms fashioned by inhuman hands. Each item had a parchment scroll beneath it, some far older and more worn than others. Crossing to the grotesque skull of a massive ork, Karras read the parchment. His eyes widened in surprise. He crossed to a bladed helm of dark metal, easily recognisable as the mask of some eldar abomination. He read the scroll beneath that one, too. Each artefact in the room was the same – a trophy, placed here to honour the Space Marine who had taken it.

He knew those names. Every last one of those Space Marines had been a Death Spectre. A few of those represented here had even returned to Occludus alive.

It was a shrine to the long service of Karras's Chapter, and he immediately felt abashed, regretting his anger of only moments ago.

He looked down. The black marble flagstones beneath his feet were engraved with four words in High Gothic:

*They served with honour.*

He scowled at himself.

*As I must. And I will add trophies of my own.*

He bowed and said a silent prayer for the souls of those long passed, then strode back into the main chamber where a heavy robe lay spread on his cot. He sat on the cot's edge and gathered up the coarse black material in his hands.

Looking down at it, he blew a deep breath out between his teeth.

*How can I do any less than follow their example? They died to honour the ancient accord. They earned the respect of the Deathwatch with blood and sweat. And I had thought to be granted it simply for qualifying. I see how naive that was. The respect of my kin was hard earned on Occludus. By Terra, I died three times to get it!*

*Let us hope I don't have to die this time, too.*

As Marnus Lochaine strode along a corridor already some distance from Karras's quarters, a voice sounded in his ear, transmitted there by the tiniest of vox devices.

'He is angry, then?'

'Naturally,' replied Lochaine.

'Will he overcome it?'

'Did I?'

‘Didn’t you, brother? How disappointing. You think he will harbour a grudge, even once his power has been returned?’

‘It will spur him on. I believe his performance will benefit.’

‘You see a little of yourself in him.’

There was humour in the voice.

‘Not so little,’ replied Lochaine with a private grin.

‘Any clue as to why the inquisitor is so interested in this one?’

‘Beyond his exceptional record, no. Not yet. He does not seem particularly pliant. Nor is he an outright rebel, so far as I can judge. But inquisitors do not make demands lightly. There may be prophecy involved. The psykers of the Ordo Xenos may have seen something we have not. His futures are so turbulent, so murky. The Librarius cannot read them. We cannot explain it, but whatever has drawn the eye of the Inquisition to Lyandro Karras, it must be significant.’

‘As must the reason these others were flagged. The Ordo did not broker the new accord for our benefit alone. What game are they playing, I wonder. Observe this Death Spectre closely, old friend. He will be trained under Watch Sergeant Kulle.’

‘Kulle?’ said Lochaine. ‘Is that wise? I would have thought, given the pedestal his Chapter places—’

‘There are worse things than a little respect. Of all the Watch sergeants, it is Kulle who has the most experience operating under an Inquisition handler. It is he who can best prepare this Karras for whatever awaits him beyond our walls.’

‘I detest this,’ said Lochaine. ‘Could we not have refused the Ordo’s request? This inquisitor already has two kill-teams at his disposal, and four of the teams assigned to him in the past have been wiped out completely. The Ordo goes too far this time. Handing us a list—’

‘No, brother. We will not refuse them. I had thought the issue resolved between us, but clearly I was wrong, so I tell you again: the new accord takes priority. It will prove its value in time. We may lose another kill-team to those crows, but the Deathwatch as a whole – not just sector-wide, but throughout the Imperium – is gaining a vital source of new blood at a critical time. We both know the importance of that strength now.’

‘Let this be an end to it, Marnus. I have spoken with finality. I’ll not retread the matter. Not with you and not with Watch Chaplain Kayphe. I will see you in the Hall of Induction within the hour. There are preparations to be made before these newcomers take First Oath.’

‘My lord’s will,’ said Lochaine curtly.

He dropped the link.

## 5

The chamber was vast – a dank echoing space cut deep in the rocky heart of Chiaro. Ordimas gazed in grim wonder as he stood among the miners, not just the men of I-8 but dozens more crews, hundreds of hard-faced, grit-stained men, all unspeaking, expectant, rigid with anticipation.

The chamber had the air of a cathedral, though it was far from grand or elaborate. Its austerity lent it atmosphere, as did the echoes that bounced back from the walls. There was a broad stone platform on the south side, its surface raised about a metre from the floor. A wide doorway gaped open at the platform's rear, about four metres across and two metres high, thick with inky shadows. Smaller portals led to tunnels that snaked off northwards. It was through one of these that Ordimas and the men of I-8 had entered. Other doorways led to tunnels east and west. The walls and floor of the large chamber were flat and smooth, almost glassy – a telltale sign that they had been fashioned with energy tools. Perhaps the place had once been an assembly area or a mess for the labourers who had toiled here before Arraphel had been bled dry.

Ordimas looked up. The roof – what little could be seen of it in the lamp-lit gloom – was rough, indicating that this had once been a natural cavern. Evenly spaced along the hall's length, great pillars stretched to that distant ceiling, their sides cut square, the corners chamfered. Iron braziers hung from each side of the pillars, their fires spreading a milky yellow haze in the close air, but giving off little or no warmth that Ordimas could feel. His breath, he noted, was still misting in the air before him. He was glad of his, or rather Mykal's, thermasuit.

*We're not deep enough for magma heat, he thought, but still deep.*

When the men of I-8 had arrived, Yunus had ordered them to park their carts in a broad side tunnel and carry their unconscious prisoners on their shoulders. Ordimas had done a quick count of the autocarts already parked there. Fifty-six of them. Whatever dark business was afoot, it involved far more people than just Yunus's crew. He couldn't have imagined at that point just how many would be convening here. Close to a thousand people, surely! Covertly, he studied them.

Most were miners or auxiliary crews, dressed in the thermasuits necessary for working Nightside. Here and there, orange overalls could be seen peeking out from beneath thick padding cinched with tool harnesses.

*This must be almost the entire labour force for the local zone.*

More unsettling still was the presence of others, people who clearly didn't belong down here. Among the silent crowd, he saw armed enforcers, robed members of the Ecclesiarchy, Administratum functionaries, even a fair number of civilians. Among this latter group were several dozen women, glassy-eyed, clad in thick woollen robes without marking. They stood together in ordered rows on the left of the platform, as silent as the others. A number of enforcers stood by them, riot-guns and assault stubbers cradled in their arms.

Other enforcers stood guard at the corners of the raised platform. Ordimas thought of that platform now as a stage, and the connection sent his mind back to happier thoughts, thoughts of puppetry and of Nedra.

*Let me live to see him again. If I die down here, he'll think I abandoned him.*

He chided himself.

*You will abandon him, you fool. As soon as the order comes in, there will be no choice.*

Still, while there was time, he wanted a chance to prepare the boy. Any explanation he gave for leaving would be better than none.

Supervisor Yunus had ordered the men of I-8 to place the bodies of their H-6 victims onto the cold, hard surface of the stage-like platform. Still bound and gagged, they were lowered face-down onto the frosty stone. Dozens of other bodies had already been laid out in neat lines. These, too, were bound and gagged, the victims of other crews or, perhaps, the victims of the civs and enforcers who'd come. There were women and men both, but no children. Ordimas could at least be thankful for that.

Some of the victims stirred to consciousness. He watched, hands clenched into fists, helpless to do anything, as they struggled against their bonds, screaming in fear and panic from behind their thick gags. An enforcer on the stage would stride forwards every time this happened and strike the writhing victim hard at the base of his or her skull with the stock of his gun.

*A dark pox on these people, cursed Ordimas, and whatever bloody cult they follow.*

As to the nature of the cult, answers still eluded him. It was not one he had ever encountered before, he felt sure. The Imperium was riddled with strange cults. There were always people ready to follow some false idol or other, despite the consequences. Heretics seemed to spread and multiply like cockroaches, and the only course of action was to stamp them out.

Those around him remained silent, watching the dark doorway at the back of

the stage, waiting passively, and Ordimas began to marvel at the patience of the strange congregation. His own was starting to fray. He couldn't hold Mykal's shape forever, though another dose of cyanomorphide[12] would extend it... If he could only self-administer more without drawing attention.

Something shifted. He felt it before he saw it. A ripple of something ran through the hall, a change on the air, the aura of someone or something approaching. The members of the gathering dropped to their knees. Ordimas, his senses supercharged by fear and tension, dropped with them, a mere fraction of a second behind, so little a delay that no one noticed. No eyes were on him anyway. Not now, for shapes began to appear, filtering from the broad space in the back wall and out onto the platform.

The men that appeared were impressively large, that much was obvious, but their hooded robes hid any sign of features beyond their size. Some walked tall and powerful, their strides easy with animal grace. Others seemed to hunch over and limp, and Ordimas was sharply reminded of his own true shape and of the fact that he was watching all this unfold with eyes set, not in his own face but in the borrowed face of dead, contemptible Mykal.

*A dead man I'll be joining if I'm not careful.*

Upright or hunched, the longer Ordimas studied them, the clearer it became that all these newcomers were misshapen. The lay of their robes on back and shoulder seemed to hint at twisted masses of bone and muscle. Surely they were cloaked thus because they were grotesquely deformed, as he was without the influence of his priceless drug.

Normally, on seeing other hunchbacks and malformed souls, Ordimas would feel a spasm of sympathy, of understanding and a kind of unspoken camaraderie. Not so here. Something about these men turned his stomach, and he wondered at that. Something at the back of his mind was repulsed by them, though he could as yet see no exposed flesh.

The strange men took up evenly spaced positions against the wall at the back of the stage. There they stood, as silent and still as the congregation kneeling on the floor. Now the final figure appeared, and the sight of him sent fingers of ice running down Ordimas's back.

He was tall, this figure that strode smoothly out of the dark doorway, and his robes were of a bluish purple rendered almost black in the weak light from the wall sconces. In his hand he carried a long stave of gleaming metal, dark gold in colour, with a red gem set in a headpiece shaped like three curving claws.

*Like the hand sign they use,* thought Ordimas.

His face was striking: utterly hairless, the skin smooth and pale with a bluish tint and a waxy sheen. It was an ageless face with no wrinkles or scars, but with none of the softness of youth. Ordimas could not guess how old this man was. He seemed at once both ancient and yet just entering his prime. But it was his eyes that were most remarkable. In the dim yellow light, they seemed to glow by themselves, like those of a wolf or cat.

*I've seen that before.*

Those eyes swept the crowd from end to end, assessing all they saw. Had those eyes lingered a fraction of a second longer on Ordimas? Or was it just his imagination?

He felt his stomach clench with fresh fear.

Dimly, he became aware of something in his mind. Nothing overt. Nothing violent. It was a subtle thing, the brushing of a psychic veil so light that its touch might be mere fancy. Then it was gone.

The august figure on the stage – among these others, he could not be mistaken for anything less than a supreme aristocrat – raised his staff and called out in a clear, crisp, pleasing voice, ‘Thou art the children of the Master. Gather, ye, to this sanctum and give Him praise.’

The men and women on the chamber floor crossed their arms over their chests, each hand making that now-familiar three-pronged sign, and intoned in one droning voice, ‘As we love, so we come to serve.’

The tall man nodded and lowered his staff. ‘All are one under the Master. All are loved. All are treasured. By His gift alone shall the time of peace and happiness come. We are His people, and His benediction has spared us from disease, madness, hunger and fear. He has raised us up, so that we might bring others into His light.’ Here, he gestured to the bound figures that lay on the stage behind him. ‘Thus, you have brought these men and women here today, that they might awaken to new hope and come to know the Master’s boundless love. Like you, they shall be granted life everlasting that they might better contribute to the coming of the Master’s divine kingdom.’

Ordimas consciously opened his senses to everything – the sights, the smells, the sounds. He took it all in, knowing that his opticom was recording it all. This was why His Lordship had sent him down here. This cult was the reason he had been assigned to Chiaro in the first place.

*And the children in the marketplace... That's where I've seen such eyes. I was not mistaken. They're a part of this somehow.*

He glanced sidelong at the group of robed women waiting by the stage.

*By the saints, don't let it be that.*

Three of the bound captives on the stage had come awake again during the tall man's speech. They thrashed and kicked helplessly, desperate to break their bonds, driven by raw, mortal dread. The enforcers at the corners stepped forwards to pacify them, but a wave of something rippled through the air of the chamber once again. Ordimas had the sudden inexplicable urge to move backwards, but the command was not meant for him. He stood where he was while the enforcers on stage reacted. They bowed low and retreated, leaving the bound figures to twist and vent their muffled screams in utter futility.

At another mental pulse, the cloaked men at the back of the stage moved forwards. They stooped over the kidnapped victims and reached down, then hefted them up, one victim over each broad shoulder, and turned to filter back through the dark doorway. The number of victims was odd, so the last of the robed figures carried only one body. Ordimas watched that hulking, misshapen man as he hauled his limp human cargo towards the dark portal. Just for a second, one of those long robe sleeves slid back, and Ordimas caught a brief flash – a glimpse, no more – of pale blue flesh, of fingers ending in curved black claws with a wicked gleam. Then the figure moved beyond sight, off down the tunnel and deeper into the maze beyond.

*Mutants?* thought Ordimas. Once again, he focused his gaze on the tall, strange man with the stave. *A psyker leading a mutant cult, harvesting people and converting them somehow? No. Something is missing. The miners and these others... They show no sign of mutation. What makes them obedient? If it was just a matter of psychic force, I'd be feeling it, warded or not. How is he controlling them?*

There was also the matter of the strange children to consider: the three-month gestation period, the eerie eyes, the cold, inhuman way they eschewed any normal childlike interaction. That didn't tie up all too cleanly with rogue psykers or mutant cults.

*How are they linked to this?*

Ordimas was to have his answer all too soon, and, in later moments of reflection, no matter how much he burned with the shame and horror of it, he could not forget what he did in that cold stone hall, deep in the rock of a cursed, doomed planet.

## 6

‘Too slow. Too damned slow. I want another eight seconds shaved off this, or we keep running it till you drop.’

Watch Sergeant Andreas Kulle of the Silver Skulls Chapter stood behind a bank of flickering monitors with two other Deathwatch Space Marines and a trio of supporting tech-adepts clothed in the black and silver robes of Watch Support. High above, the moon of Damaroth filled two-thirds of the sky with its lambent blue bulk. Cloud patterns churned slowly, lazily on its surface.

Karras, his fatigues damp with sweat, sighed and looked up. He breathed deeply, taking a moment to mentally reset himself.

*No shadows here. So much ambient light.*

He glanced to his left, then to his right. Far off in the distance, the inner surface of the Watch fortress’s great ring could be seen curving up towards the glowing moon. Even with his eyesight boosted far beyond that of a normal man, any detail of the structures on those far curves was lost to the vast expanse and the bluish haze.

The training was so different, so precise. Karras hadn’t felt like this since his days as a Scout. There were similarities, of course: the endless hours of sensorium review and neuro-reactive simulation overseen by Lochaine and the rest of the Watch Librarius; the live-fire range practice and close combat drills designed with the physiology of alien opponents in mind. These things he had taken to with ease and familiarity. But this...

‘You’ve got six minutes to prepare and board the Stormraven before we run it again,’ Kulle boomed. ‘Do better. Codicier Karras, a word please.’

Karras dropped his gaze from the heavens and walked over to the group behind the monitors. Passing him, a small army of servitors walked and trundled into kill-block Ophidion to restore the building to its pre-assault state. It was the twentieth time they had done so since morning repast.

‘Karras,’ said Kulle with a nod. The Space Marines flanking him on either side, both being groomed for Watch sergeant status, also nodded, like mirror images on some kind of time delay.

‘Sergeant,’ said Karras.

‘Analysis, please.’

‘Much as before, sergeant. For the most part, it’s the smoke-and-clear on that final room. Without enhanced vision modes or any kind of real-time tactical data-feed, our coordination is suffering. We’re still adapting to this kind of rooftop insertion, and operating without power armour is causing the team to overcompensate. We’re rushing things, so our timings are all over the place.’

Kulle looked at the brothers standing silently on either side.

‘Comments,’ he demanded.

The one on the left – hard-faced Brother Ghan of the Aurora Chapter – was eager to speak first. ‘They should have the method of entry down by now, sergeant. This performance is unacceptable. Eight seconds is a lifetime in tactical asset recovery.’

Karras had to force himself not to scowl at the acerbic, red-bearded Space Marine. How fast had *he* adjusted to Deathwatch methodology? Fast-roping, rooftop insertions, window entries; in general, Space Marine warfare was waged without the need for such subtle things. Brutal and direct was standard. The Adeptus Astartes marched proudly out to sow death among man’s foes. They didn’t sneak in through windows with silenced weapons. Such work was for assassins.

*Assassins and Deathwatch operatives, apparently.*

A kill-team was a precision tool, called upon to handle anti-xenos operations that other forces simply could not – the exact words of the Watch Commander at the induction ceremony. Well, what better way to cripple an enemy force than eliminate its leadership? Fast, efficient, effective. A single bolter-round could change the face of an entire war.

Perhaps there *was* something to be said for this kind of approach.

‘Brother Procion?’ said Kulle.

The other observer, bearing the silver cross icon of the Iron Knights, smiled. ‘Brother Karras mastered this MoE on the third run. He speaks as if the fault were shared when it is not. Of course, to some extent, an Alpha *should* see the team’s flaws as his own. But it is the Fire Lord who is slowing them down. Brother Uphreidi should switch positions with the Invader, Mannix. Dropping from the rear hatch might suit him better.’

‘Thoughts, Karras?’ said Kulle.

‘Uphreidi and Mannix shall switch as recommended,’ replied Karras. ‘I thank Brother Procion for the advice.’

Karras saw Ghan scowl and shake his head. Kulle and Procion missed it. The Aurora Space Marine rarely offered anything but criticism, and none of it

particularly useful. He verbally compared everything he saw against his own past performance, seeing this training session only as a chance to expound his own virtues in front of Kulle.

Procion, on the other hand, had been constructive from the start. Still, Karras was frustrated, and the source of that frustration was Watch Sergeant Andreas Kulle.

Was Kulle really running this exercise for the benefit of the new Watch members? Or was his true goal the evaluation of the ne-sergeants[\[13\]](#) he had brought along?

Karras felt he and the other trainees deserved better than that.

‘You asked for another eight seconds cut, sergeant,’ he said brusquely. ‘Might I ask how you yourself would achieve it?’

Kulle met Karras’s gaze and found it hard and penetrating, like a spear-tip.

*There it is, thought the Silver Skull. He knows I’ve been distracted. Ghan and Procion have waited long enough for our decision, but I needed to be absolutely sure. Very well, Death Spectre. I have all the information I need, in any case.*

‘Brother Procion. Brother Ghan. You are dismissed for now,’ said Kulle without turning to them. ‘Return to quarters and write up your conclusions. Have them ready by evening assembly. I’ll read them after last litany.’

Both the Space Marines looked less than happy at being sent off, but saluted Kulle stiffly with right fist to chest. ‘For the honour of the Watch,’ they intoned together. Then they turned and stalked towards a cluster of block-shaped buildings a few hundred metres to the south. One of these blocks was the Mag-line node from where they would take an auto-carriage back to their chapel-barracks.

Karras did not imagine the journey would be one of friendly banter. He looked at Kulle, awaiting his attention.

The Watch sergeant’s light grey eyes followed the two candidates as they departed. When they were gone, he said, ‘Ghan won’t make it. He served with distinction on Squad Cerberus for eighteen years, but he hasn’t the mindset for a Watch sergeant. He’ll be given another kill-team or he’ll be released to return to his Chapter. Procion, though...’

The sergeant turned his gaze back to Karras. ‘In a Deathwatch kill-team, the weakness of one is the weakness of all. The Alpha *must* know the identity and nature of the weakest link. It is his role to correct for that weakness or, if possible, to eliminate it entirely.’

‘I did not realise it was Uphreidi who was slowing the insertion,’ said Karras.

‘You suspected another,’ said Kulle, grinning. ‘Good. I have the advantage of the monitors, and you are operating without helm or gift, so allowances must be made, but I’m glad you saw it. The insertion *is* an issue, as Procion pointed out, but storming the final room – the smoke-and-clear stage of the assault – is at least half of your problem. You realise that one of your team is deliberately hampering you?’

‘Hampering, yes, but deliberately?’

Kulle dropped his grin. ‘I told Procion and Ghan not to say anything. I’m glad you noticed. It is the Ultramarine, Solarion. He has been undermining the team’s performance since the first run, clearing the west hallway at a stroll, breaching his assigned door a full second after everyone else goes in. If it were just incompetence, I would swap him out, but the Deathwatch sequesters no incompetents to its ranks. If he were such, he would not be here. I’ve seen his feeds. He is an exemplary operator. He is almost certainly throwing you off by choice. Have you clashed before? Is there some history we should know about?’

Karras was speechless. The Ultramarine? They had not even shared words before this day.

A flat, grille-distorted voice spoke from beside the bank of monitors on the left. It was one of the tech-priests. ‘The kill-block is reset, Watch sergeant. The servitor crews have withdrawn. The Stormraven is ready.’

‘What will you do about Solarion?’ Kulle asked Karras.

As the Stormraven powered up its turbines on the far right, Karras wrestled with a fury that had lit inside him. Turning his will upon it like a torrent of icy water, he forced himself to extinguish it. Emotion would not serve. It was efficiency the Deathwatch demanded. He could see only one way to get it.

‘I’ll partner with him. Mannix will take the west hall. Solarion moves with me. We’ll see how he likes that.’

Kulle’s grin returned, predatory, like the blade-toothed smile of a Cestean crocophid. ‘Just don’t *accidentally* shoot him, brother. A friendly fire incident will look bad on my report.’

His gaze shifted over Karras’s right shoulder to the area by the ammo tables where the others had finished resupplying and prepping their weapons. Dropping his grin, he shouted over at them:

‘Back in the Stormraven, you cack-handed sloths. The twenty-first time is the charm!’

Higgan Dozois ran his eyes over the woman's form for the thousandth time, drinking it in with the same pleasure he always did. It was something he did on reflex now, something he seemed incapable of resisting. There she stood before the viewport, back towards him, utterly indifferent to him despite every card he had played over the last seven weeks. He rolled his gaze over the sweep of her hips, the long slender legs in their glossy black breeches, the shapely calves that fitted snugly into the tops of her spike-heeled boots. She shifted, and her black hair shimmered in the pale cream light of the viewing deck.

*What a torment she is, thought Dozois. I swear she delights in taunting me. Only an hour to groundside, and then it's over. All those weeks, all those hours together, and she's given me nothing. If she wasn't paying so well...*

It still rankled despite that princely sum. He had been a gentleman from the start, naturally. She had dined nightly at the captain's table. He had given her the very best quarters on his ship, save his own, of course. He had plied her with fine wines, rare dishes, high-minded conversation, games for two. He had even stated his desires plainly when all else had proven futile. But this woman, born of a Noble House with more financial troubles than his own if reports read true, rebuffed his every advance.

Dozois, who was not an unhandsome man and heir to a significant portion of his House's wealth, could not understand it. He had always enjoyed a fine measure of success with female passengers. But then, he had never wanted to bed a woman quite so much as he wanted Lady Fara Devanon. Once again, he allowed his eyes to trace those hips. *Exquisite*. Perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps she sensed his eagerness and was repulsed by it. *Far too late to affect indifference now*, thought Dozois. *Journey's end*. He and his crew had brought her, as contracted, to Chiaro. Her House sought to secure industrial supply contracts here, though why it should hope to do so on a planet so far from any major Imperial trading lanes was beyond him. She had made some vague reference to a distant familial tie here. Dozois had been too busy admiring the graceful line of her neck to pay much attention.

He had examined her cargo on loading, as was his right: mining lasers and heavy machinery for the most part, some consumables, very little of interest to

him personally. They would sell, he guessed – perhaps even at a decent mark-up – but, according to his own sources, Chiaro’s output had been in decline for decades. It rather looked as if House Devanon was locking the gates after the grox had bolted, so to speak.

*All of which means what?* Dozois asked himself bitterly. *What do you care? Get her off the Macedon and be done with it.*

He had other contracts waiting and, while none would pay quite as well as the Devanon contract, they ought at least to cause him less frustration.

Lady Fara spoke, bringing him back to the moment. Even her smooth voice, the voice of a woman trained and educated to the upper limits of her House’s provision, stoked the fires of his lust.

‘I had seen picts, of course,’ she told him without turning from the window. ‘But its strangeness only really becomes apparent to the naked eye, don’t you think?’

Dozois walked across to stand by her side. Even a metre away, he imagined he could feel the heat of her body. Testily, he tried to focus on the planet below.

‘I’ve seen no rock like it,’ he conceded. ‘Though I’ve seen countless eggs of that very shape.’

The lady didn’t bother to laugh.

‘You see the dark band there?’ she said, pointing. ‘The Nystarean Gorge. It runs the entire circumference of the planet. Four kilometres deep on average. Quite remarkable.’

Dozois followed the direction of the woman’s long finger. ‘I’ve read the dossier,’ he told her, and was surprised at the churlish quality in his voice. Quickly, he reeled himself in and added in gentler tones, ‘There’s an ongoing debate, I believe, about the origin of the canyon. Solid arguments that it’s artificial, you know. Crafted by some ancient xenos race, they say. Then again, they say many things, don’t they?’

‘I could believe it, captain. In fact, I’m sure I could believe anything about this world. Strangeness seems built into its very fabric.’

Dozois couldn’t dispute that. Chiaro was unique in all his experience, and his travels had taken him to the rimward boundaries of two segmenta. Nothing he had seen looked quite like this.

Chiaro’s axis of rotation pointed directly at the heart of its local star, Ienvo, meaning that, unlike other worlds, there was no day-night cycle. To the ground-dwellers who lived on the canyon floor, only the stars in the sky appeared to change as the planet rolled on its axis. The floor of the Nystarean Gorge was

suitable for human habitation, but nowhere else was. Chiaro's northern hemisphere was constantly bathed in Ienvo's flesh-crisping glare, while the southern hemisphere was eternally dark and deathly cold.

*Nightside and Dayside*, thought Dozois, *and men eking out an existence in the narrow gap between. Poor sods. Give me a captain's life or none at all.*

The Nystarean Gorge might be habitable, but men didn't fill all that much of it. There were only two major cities on Chiaro: Najra and Cholixe. A mere six hundred and ninety kilometres stood between them.

Cholixe, the larger of the two, was populated mostly by the Garrahym people, a racial minority on their home world of Delta III Ragash. The Garrahym had been brought to Chiaro en masse to work the freezing mines of Nightside. According to the files Lady Fara had shared, the Garrahym were a hardy, stocky breed prone to quick violence and high alcohol consumption. These facts in themselves were of little interest to Dozois – his holds carried little alcohol and even less weaponry. But he knew from experience that elements of such a culture would also be prone to certain chemical addictions – a fact that did much to brighten his mood. As profitable as Lady Fara's patronage might be for the captain and crew of the *Macedon*, he could hardly have kept his ship in fuel if not for his trade in *yaga*. The shipping and selling of the illegal narcotic root was punishable by death, but it was so potent and so difficult to detect through traditional scanning methods, that modest quantities could easily be hidden, then suitably diluted and mixed with reagents once the target market was reached. There would be demand in Cholixe, Dozois was sure. Few ships other than Adeptus Mechanicus cargo freighters ever landed here, and the priests of the Ommissiah offered no competition in black-market goods. They cared little for anything save their mad obsession with technology.

Najra, the smaller of Chiaro's two cities despite being the official capital, was a different matter. Dozois did not plan to go there. For whatever reason, Lady Fara's appointments were in Cholixe only, and she had commissioned transport solely to that city. A pity in some respects, for Dozois preferred the bustle of planetary capitals when he went groundside, but he doubted he would be missing all that much this time around. Najra's populace were far less likely to indulge in the dangerously addictive joys of his wares. The people of that city were Hasmiri: devout, hard-working, and pledged to the ascetical teachings of their beloved Saint Sufra. They worked Dayside, excavating and mining the machine-cooled tunnels below the northern hemisphere's baking surface. Sufra had been one of those sour-faced saints who spent his whole life condemning pleasure in

any and every form. No. There would be little business for Dozois among the Hasmiri.

*Just Cholixe, then, Dozois told himself. Just the Garrahym. Drop, sell and split. And good riddance to this devil-temptress!*

‘Don’t you think?’

Dozois started, suddenly aware the lady had been speaking to him while his thoughts had turned to business.

‘Forgive me, m’lady,’ he said with a forced smile. ‘I was miles away. You were talking about the origin of the gorge? No conclusive explanations, even after millennia of human occupation. I think we may never know the answers to Chiaro’s riddles. Then again, if the Martian priesthood ever did uncover its secrets, would we ever know? I doubt it.’

Lady Fara turned to face him and smiled back with red lips of the most exquisite shape. Dozois thought he heard blood rushing through his ears, red cells rasping on the inner surface of his veins. ‘There are some mysteries we ought not to solve, don’t you think?’ the lady purred. ‘What would life be without a little mystery?’

*Now or never, thought the captain. A last charge.*

‘Mystery has its place,’ he concurred, leaning slightly forwards, ‘and yet, what satisfaction is there in a question unanswered? We have an hour, dear Fara,’ he said, deliberately opting to drop her rightful prefix. ‘Shall we not finally answer the question which has hung over us both since you came aboard?’

Lady Fara feigned confusion. ‘And what question is that, my good captain?’

*See how she plays the game.*

Dozois inched a little closer and made bed-eyes. ‘The question that always stands between a man and a woman, my dear. Simply, how good would it be?’

Lady Fara lapsed abruptly into delighted, almost musical laughter. She put a cool white hand to his cheek and, once her laughter had subsided, told him, ‘I have enjoyed you so, captain. Truly, your company and your humour have made a long, dull journey that much more bearable, and for that I thank you.’

Dozois’s smile was painted on. She... she was actually *laughing* at him. Did she think him some kind of joke?

‘I must rouse my entourage,’ she told him, dropping her hand from his face. ‘We must make ready for the drop. Until then.’

With that, she turned and strode towards the doors at the far end of the room. The yellowing scan-skull above the doorway detected her. Red lights blinked green in its sockets. The door hissed open with twin bursts of greasy steam.

Dozois stood numb, watching her go. Without turning, Fara Devanon slinked through the door and out into the corridor, hips rolling like the flanks of a sleek black panther.

The captain turned his eyes back to the viewport and to the bizarre planet below.

*Seven weeks, he thought bitterly. Seven bloody weeks. And nothing for me but mockery. To the blasted warp with you, whore. May your precious mysteries swallow your soul down there.*

Shianna Varlan, Interrogator Class 3 of the Ordo Xenos of His Imperial Majesty's Holy Orders of the Inquisition, stalked off down the corridor at a steady pace, heels clicking on the plasteel floor. She followed a route that would take her back to her quarters aboard the *Macedon* for the last time, and to the aides that awaited her there. So much to do in this last hour before boarding the drop-shuttle. This accursed journey was almost over, thank the Throne. It had been all too long and tortuous. The insufferable captain had barely given her a moment's peace: invitations every time he sat at table, requests for her personal company at regular readings given by the ship's chaplain, the constant battering innuendo while they played hand after hand of *Heretic!* together. His eyes were on her all the time. She detested it. The way his gaze played over her was almost a physical, tangible thing, like invisible hands groping. All men were the same, little better than beasts.

*No. Not all, Shianna, she reminded herself. His Lordship is different.*

Still, such unwelcome attention was hardly new to her. Fine genes were one of the primary assets for which she had been chosen, and she used them to the fullest, as she was expected to, even commanded to. But orders or not, it made her feel unclean, and that in turn made her wrathful. She had hated Dozois from the first, that simple, foolish man. But, as was always the case, greater need had forced her to put personal feelings aside. She had played her role to perfection: Lady Fara Devanon, aristocratic daughter of a minor House struggling to improve its lot; a woman firm in the knowledge of her feminine allure, but aware, too, that this was a coin to be spent only once. Give a man like Dozois exactly what he sought and you lost all power over him. The character Lady Fara, much like the woman who played her, valued her self-respect.

*Pray we do not meet under other circumstances, you inbred fool! For I'll surely kill you if we do.*

Thoughts only, an empty threat, but the mental image that accompanied them

pleased her. In all likelihood, she would never see Dozois again after today. It was time to put the foolish man aside, time to focus on the next phase of the operation. Her transit to Chiaro was at its end. On arrival in Cholixe, her work would begin in earnest.

She knew little of what lay ahead, but that was hardly new either. According to His Lordship, there were other assets already in play. Something on Chiaro had demanded the special attention of the Ordo Xenos. She would discover its nature soon enough.

And then, if so commanded, she would destroy it.

## 8

The black bulk of the Stormraven assault transport hovered ten metres over the kill-block roof on tongues of blue fire. Cables dropped from side and rear hatches. There was a sharp shout from inside.

‘Kill-team, go!’

Three slab-muscled figures in black fatigues dropped at speed, controlling their descent with gloved hands only. Slung across their backs were boltguns, slightly smaller and more compact than those they were used to. Cinched around waist and chest, they wore combat webbing stocked with grenades and other tactical equipment. Boots hit the rooftop with a subdued, tread-muffled thump. Immediately, the three spread out, securing east, west and north edges of the building, leaning out, visually sweeping the windows and balconies below for sign of enemy sentries.

Two others dropped a second later. Onboard winches whipped the droplines back up, and the Stormraven lifted away, tilting as it left the infil point.

The last two figures to drop darted to the north edge of the roof. As soon as they were in place, all five operatives pulled a small pistol-like device from a holster in their webbing, pressed the muzzle to the permacrete lip at the edge of the roof, and pulled the trigger. There was a crumping sound and five little coughs of dust. Each figure pulled on his pistol and a length of black polyfibre cable started to unspool from inside the grip. With a brief tug to check each line was secure, the five stepped onto the permacrete lip, turned, and dropped backwards from the edges of the roof.

Karras pushed off with his legs, flying out a little way from the surface of the wall, and released the trigger on the pistol. He dropped about three metres, then pulled the trigger again, arresting his descent. He swung back in and braced his legs on the wall, then bunched his muscles, ready for another push off. To his right, Ignacio Solarion, the Ultramarine, did the same. When Karras had paired them up, he’d said nothing, but the look on his face had hardly been one of joy.

Below, a broad semicircular balcony extended out from the wall. From that balcony, a wide set of plastek double-doors offered access to the kill-block’s rooms and corridors.

Together, Karras and Solarion dropped to the balcony and abandoned their

ziplines. They took position on either side of the double doors, backs pressed to the wall. Solarion looked over at Karras, his pale blue eyes cold and hard. Karras nodded for him to proceed. From his webbing, Solarion took a small canister with a long, tubular nozzle, then stuck his head out to check there were no hostiles on the other side of the panes of transparent plastek. Seeing none, he stepped to the centre, lifted his canister, and began to spray a large, irregular outline – bigger than himself – directly onto the glassy surface. Corrosive black foam began to bubble as it ate away at the windows' molecular bonds.

With the outline finished, Solarion returned the canister to its pouch and gripped the doors' outer handles.

Karras was counting in his head. At sixteen, he gave the go.

Solarion tugged the handles and two large pieces of frame and glass came away in his hands – no shattering, only the slightest sound of breakage.

The Ultramarine turned and laid the pieces carefully down. Karras moved inside in a half-crouch, bolter raised, stock pressed to shoulder. He heard quiet footfalls behind him as Solarion followed.

*SpACE*, thought Karras, sweeping the room.

The Watch sergeants had drummed it into them since the beginning of day two.

*Spacing, Angles, Corners, Exits.*

This room was clear, but it might not have been. Kulle kept changing enemy dispersal every time he sent them in. He kept changing the sentry patrol patterns, too.

Beyond the door in the far side lay the north hallway from which he and Solarion would proceed to the objective room. Moving fast, Karras placed himself on the right of the door. Solarion took his place on the left. Each signalled readiness to the other. So far, so good.

Karras reached out a gloved hand and pressed the access rune. The door slid sideways into its housing. Before it had finished, Karras was already out in the corridor, muzzle covering the left.

'Contact!'

A ghostly eldar sentry spun and, on seeing Karras, raised the fluted muzzle of its alien pistol.

Karras's bolter coughed quietly and the tall, slender alien crumpled, then flickered with greenish static, blurred into lower resolution and disappeared altogether. In the wall behind where it had stood, a small black crater bled thin wisps of smoke. A hololithic projector in the ceiling above buzzed briefly, its

indicator light changing from green to red. Karras turned.

Behind him, Solarion had taken out a similar target.

‘Let’s move,’ said Karras, indicating southwards. Together, Karras hugging the left wall and Solarion the right, they stalked off down the now unguarded corridor. As they proceeded closer to the central chamber at the far end, they kept their muzzles level, covering the metal apertures on either side and the corridor junction ahead where the path split east and west. There was no time to clear each side chamber in this high-speed secure-for-extraction exercise.

The scenario was simple: three high-value Imperial Naval personnel had been taken alive by so-called dark eldar during a xenos assault on an Imperial outpost. The Navy personnel each held critical strategic information, none of which overlapped, meaning all three needed to be recovered alive before they could be broken by cruel xenos torture or mind-manipulation. They were designated Apollon-level assets; the loss of even one during the operation meant a mission failure.

Kill-block Ophidion didn’t look like any space port Karras had ever seen, of course, but that hardly mattered. A little imagination was often called for during training.

A metal door on the right slid upwards and a spidery figure emerged: black hair pinned up with small white bones, pointed ears on either side of a long, narrow, olive-skinned face.

Solarion dropped the target before its shoulders had even cleared the doorway. The image of the dark eldar spun, flickered and rezzed out, giving its simulated cohorts in the room behind it ample warning that they were under attack. Bone-like muzzles suddenly bristled from the doorway. Enemy fire blazed into the hallway. The holo-projected shots whined and buzzed through the air above Karras’s head, given worrying realism by the kill-block’s advanced audio system.

‘Blood and blazes!’ he hissed.

Solarion dropped to a full crouch and fired back, bolts smacking into the doorframe behind which the hostiles hid. These rounds didn’t detonate as bolter-rounds usually did. They were practice bolts, nicknamed *clippers* – low-velocity, non-explosive slugs of the type used in kill-block training as standard. Sparks leapt from each harmless impact.

*Multiple roused targets in hard cover, thought Karras bitterly. The run is practically scuppered already. That idiot knows better. Kulle was right about him trying to undermine me.*

Over the link, he heard the others report that they were in position around the target room. Karras couldn't let them storm that room without either he or Solarion coming in from the north side. He wouldn't send them in to be cut down knowing that Kulle always kept the hostages heavily guarded. There would be too many foes inside for three operatives to handle without a casualty or two, Space Marines or not.

Gritting his teeth, he made his decision. He marked the distance to the door from which all the fire was coming, then pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing. Arming it, he tossed it just in front of the enemy. With a hiss, thick grey smoke billowed out, quickly filling the confines of the corridor and much of the side chamber. Visibility dropped to nothing, but Karras had everything he needed in his head. He tugged a frag grenade free and burst into a low run. The aliens were blind-firing now. He did his best to cut a safe path through their simulated barrage. Behind him, Solarion was still firing at the shrouded door, though he could no more see it now than Karras could. At least his fire offered some suppression. Maybe Karras wouldn't be cut to pieces.

*Or maybe I will, but he has left me no choice.*

Between the smoke and the covering fire, it was enough. As Karras passed the door, he didn't slow, but he tossed the primed frag grenade inside, and kept running straight through the choking cloud and beyond it. Ahead of him, where the corridors formed a T-junction, the north entrance to the objective room loomed large. He put on a burst of speed. Over the link, he growled, 'Space Marines, breach in three...'

His feet pounded the floor. Six metres to go.

'Two...'

*Closer.*

'One...'

*Closer.*

'Go,' he barked. Behind him, his grenade detonated. Like the clipper rounds in his bolter, the grenade was a modified training version, packed with only enough explosive to generate a loud noise. Smoke still lingered to hide the results from view, but four projected dark eldar flickered into non-existence and a cluster of indicator lights turned from green to red.

Karras was already beyond thinking about any of that. All that mattered was the hostage room, the double-doors of which raced towards him. He was supposed to breach them with a small demo charge, but there was no time. Solarion had seen to that. With a grunt, he hurled himself forwards, slamming

his left shoulder hard into the centre of the doors.

There was a great crack as locks and hinge mechanisms ripped from the frame. Like a living juggernaut, Karras exploded through it to the other side, just as his other three team members – Uphreidi, Mannix, and Ansul of the Sons of Sanguinius – stormed the room from south, east and west. Silenced bolters coughed. The dark eldar within had heard the grenade detonate just a fraction of a second before the kill-team burst in – all save Solarion, that is, who was now bringing up the rear. Eight of the cruel-faced xenos had spun towards the doors, raising their strange weapons a moment too late. Clipper rounds whipped through them and they vanished like ghosts. That had been in the first second. In the next, Karras's team cut down the four remaining foes, all of whom were moving to execute their hostages – three small, nervous-looking men in the starched uniforms and gold brocade of the Admiralty. One of the dark eldar almost succeeded, his black sword about to fall, but there came the sound of a single muffled shot from behind Karras, and the alien disappeared with his vile kin.

That last kill belonged to Solarion. He stepped into the room and looked around.

‘Clear,’ said Brother Mannix.

‘Clear,’ echoed each of the others.

‘Secure the exits,’ Karras told them. ‘Overwatch on all approaches.’

The three Naval personnel disappeared now, just like the eldar, fizzling out as if they had never been there at all. Of course, they hadn't.

Adrenaline pumping, hearts still hammering in his ears, Karras opened a vox-channel to Watch Sergeant Kulle.

‘Alpha here, sergeant. Objectives secured. No casualties. Ready for exfil.’

‘What was that in the hallway, Alpha? That was a damned mess. If you hadn't rammed those doors, we'd be looking at total asset loss.’

‘I know, sergeant,’ Karras growled. He glared over at Solarion. The Ultramarine had his back to him, his eyes turned outwards to the corridor he was covering.

*That fool. What's his issue? I'll have an explanation, by the Throne.*

‘What was our time?’

‘Better,’ said Kulle. ‘You shaved off three seconds with that death-or-glory run of yours. Still, that's not how we like to see things done around here.’

‘It shouldn't have happened.’

‘No, it should not. But you thought fast. You'll be remembered for it.’

‘I think... What?’

There was a pause on the other end of the link that Karras didn't much like, then Kulle said, ‘You're a dead man, Karras. Right about now, you'd be doubled over on the floor vomiting up what's left of your dissolving organs. When you rushed the side doorway and dropped that grenade, an enemy round took you in the upper left thigh. The dark eldar use powerful toxins. Some of them are beyond even the *Purifier's* [\[14\]](#) abilities. You would have lived long enough to storm the room, but, if this were anything but an exercise, I'd be talking to your Two right now, not to you. Even your progenoids [\[15\]](#) would be lost.’

Karras stood stunned. His progenoids ruined? So, not only had the surly Ultramarine gotten him killed, he had robbed him of the honour of providing that final genetic legacy to his Chapter. No Space Marine could stomach thoughts of such a death.

He thundered over to where Solarion stood and spun him violently around. Placing a big hand on the Ultramarine's throat, Karras slammed him against the doorframe and drove him up into the air, his back pressed hard against it.

Solarion reacted at once, throwing a blistering left hook at Karras's temple. But Karras still had a free hand. He raised his elbow and redirected the blow.

‘If you ever do anything like that again, you piece of—’

Solarion brought his knees up fast and used them to lever Karras back. Overextended, Karras had to let the Ultramarine drop. Solarion landed in stance, ready to defend himself.

‘Ever do what, witchblood?’ he spat.

‘You know damned well,’ said Karras, eyes blazing at the slur.

Solarion's snarl became a sneer. ‘I told them you weren't equal to this. The Death Spectres? What great part have you played in history? A third-tier Chapter stuck out in the middle of nowhere. Your home world isn't even within the bounds of the Imperium. And they put *you* in charge of *me*?’

Eyes still on Karras, he bent and retrieved his fallen bolter.

‘I was called to Damaroth because I'm the best,’ insisted Solarion, his conviction absolute. ‘The Ultramarine before me was a kill-team leader, and the one before him. I'll not be subordinate to the likes of you.’

‘I didn't make that decision,’ Karras threw back.

‘But it suits you well enough.’

Karras felt something stir that he had thought locked away. His rage must have broken through somehow, momentarily pushing him beyond the limiting power of the warp field suppressor on his spine.

His gift flared like a struck match, not the blaze it should have been, not even close to the eldritch strength he had known before, but it was there, enough to feel, enough to lash out with before he could restrain himself.

Balefire licked upwards from his eyes. The space around him pulsed.

Solarion was lifted into the air by powerful invisible hands and hurled against the far wall. He crashed into it with a grunt, then dropped hard to the floor. He righted himself quickly and stood glaring across the room at Karras. A strange smile spread his lips. ‘And now you’ve struck me,’ he said with icy calm.

Karras felt an immediate rush of shame. This was not how things should be. He knew the glory of the Ultramarines. He would never, could never, have imagined attacking one like this.

*What has gotten into me? Where is my self-control? Is my anger due to the insult, or to the sealing of my power? I had not thought my equilibrium so dependent on it. They were right to seal it away. I see now that my dependence is a weakness I must overcome.*

There was blood on Solarion’s lip. He wiped it off with the back of his hand. The other three Space Marines stood in tense silence, unsure whether to step in or not. They had all heard it; Karras’s honour had been insulted beyond reasonable tolerance, even to the most lenient among them. But the Ultramarines were greatly respected. For the most part, at least, they were paragons of what it meant to be a Space Marine.

Karras heard Kulle lambasting them over the link.

‘Stand down, both of you! Do not force me to use the neural interrupt. Codicier Karras, I want to see you down here now.’ He paused before adding, ‘You’re not supposed to be able to do that.’

Karras briefly considered apologising to Solarion, but the fool had insulted his Chapter. The psychic assault had been wrong, but the Ultramarine’s ignorant words were no less so. Instead, he said nothing and strode from the room. There was a staircase to the left, down the west corridor, that led to the front exit on the ground level. He took this and, as he walked down the steps, he heard Kulle addressing him again, this time on a closed channel. ‘They told me the suppression field was set to maximum. What did you do?’

‘He went too far,’ said Karras, voice flat now.

‘It happens. But overloading the implant... That does not.’

Karras couldn’t find it in himself to care about the implant and the expectations the Watch Council placed on it. His power had overridden it only briefly, just long enough to make a bad situation worse. It had subsided now. He

tried to call it up again, to create a ball of balefire in his hand, but the implant blocked him as before. It was fury that had overcome it, not will or need. Just rage, plain and simple.

‘The Ultramarine crossed the line, sergeant,’ he told Kulle, ‘but my response crossed it further. I will endure whatever punishment I must.’

‘We shall see,’ said Kulle. ‘For my part, I say he had it coming, but I shall have to consult with the council.’

‘I understand.’

‘Now,’ said the Silver Skull, ‘get your team down here and prep for the next run. You’ve got six minutes.’ After a pause, he added, ‘I’ll have to work out how to report this.’

Karras halted on the stairs, unable to believe what he was hearing.

‘Are you serious, sergeant?’ he asked. ‘We’re to run the exercise again?’

‘I don’t joke about kill-block training, Librarian. Not ever. Get down here and prep for infil. We’ve still got five seconds to cut!’

## 9

Captain Dozois's farewell surprised Varlan with its brevity. She had gotten deeper under his skin than she had realised. He was bitter and angry, and he struggled visibly to keep it in check. During a descent that felt much longer than it was, he refused to look at her. When addressed, he clenched his jaw and offered only one-word answers or made short, mumbled comments mostly directed at himself. That suited Varlan fine. She was relieved when they finally hit groundside, knowing the moment she would be free of his company was close at hand. Even then, however, with the cargo shuttle settling on its thick metal feet, Dozois sat tense, barely looking at her across the craft's well-appointed passenger cabin. She half expected him to order her out.

There was the matter of his fee, of course, and for that, he finally had to engage her directly. Varlan, or rather Lady Fara as she was still known to him, presented a black case made of a hard, light ceramic. Dozois placed the case on his lap, entered the code exactly as the lady instructed, and opened it. The gems within sparkled in the light from the overhead lumes. He called a child-sized servitor out from an alcove in the wall and had it run a substance analysis. Emeralds from the vaults of House Devanon, just as agreed. Superb quality. Everything checked out. Paid in full, he closed the case and handed it to his first officer, Sarapho, whom he ordered to await him in his quarters.

When the doors hissed shut behind Sarapho's back, Dozois stood stiffly and offered his hand. 'Our business is concluded, Lady Fara,' he said coolly, meaning to dismiss her without further ado.

Varlan stood, much amused by the change in his demeanour since earlier in the day, and took the outstretched hand. She noted that he did not give hers a playful squeeze this time. He had abandoned all hope at last. Throne knew, it had taken long enough. *If only the captain of the Macedon had been a woman*, Varlan thought to herself.

'Will you be staying groundside for long, captain?' she asked.

'A week, perhaps,' Dozois replied, not quite meeting her gaze. 'Maybe two. We'll secure provisions, fuel and such – see what the locals have to offer by way of trade goods. I have other concerns awaiting my attention, however, so I can't dally overlong on this rock. I doubt our paths will cross again before I return to

my ship.’

‘Oh, how regrettable,’ Varlan lied, and did not care that he knew it. ‘Still, such is the busy life of a starship captain. I shan’t keep you. I shall simply thank you again for your hospitality and wish you every success.’

If it was a polite smile Dozois attempted, he failed. It came out as a bizarre sort of anguished sneer.

‘Emperor guide you and watch over you, lady,’ he said without feeling, and promptly released her hand.

Varlan turned and strode to the cabin’s forward exit. Before she passed beyond it, she stopped to nod her thanks one last time, half expecting the captain’s eyes to be on her as usual. But Dozois was already making for the other exit in the far wall.

She didn’t quite know if she felt perversely disappointed or satisfied, or both.

*One week, she thought. Maybe two. Will this operation be concluded by then? I’d not travel with him outwards unless so ordered. Better to wait for a Mechanicus ship, though the next won’t be due for months.*

She’d know better after consulting with the Ordo’s assets on the ground.

Minutes later, descending the shuttle’s ramp to the black rockcrete of the landing field, Varlan was met by her aides, Oroga and Myrda. The twins fell in behind her, walking in step, lens-eyes scanning the tall stacks of cargo crates for any sign of threat. Their heavy arm-augmetics were concealed by coat sleeves and kratyd-skin gloves. Knives and stunners were likewise well concealed. To the untrained eye, they would have seemed mere aides. To the trained, they would have appeared bodyguards, for they moved with a predator’s balance and grace. In truth, they filled both roles, allowing Varlan to maintain such a small retinue that she tended to draw far less attention than she otherwise might. Accountability was forever an issue in her work. She was under no illusions about that; drawing an excess of scrutiny by storming around cities with a large, intimidating group of oath-bonded warriors and agents would render her far less useful to His Lordship. While her false identity remained solid, she had undercover access to Imperial social strata beyond what could normally be reached. Lady Fara Devanon had as comprehensive and verifiable a history as any member of a minor House, even if it was entirely fabricated. Varlan would do nothing to jeopardise that. Which is why, when a gaggle of short men in blue tunics walked out to meet her from the space port’s main arrivals building, she hid her irritation. She had suspected this might happen. From the moment Chiaro GDC had received the *Macedon*’s passenger list, her name would have been

flagged. Nobility always drew note. Sure enough, the local governor had sent his agents to greet her, and here they were.

The men, of which there were four, stopped in Varlan's path and bowed low. She sensed Oroga and Myrda readying themselves for violence – a subtle repositioning apparent only to her. The twins were as adept at concealment as she was. Their readiness to kill was a thing sensed on the air rather than seen. It seemed that the men in blue tunics did not sense it. They paid no heed whatsoever.

*Or perhaps they do, and are themselves adept at concealment.*

An interrogator took nothing at face value.

As the men emerged from their bows, one spoke. 'Do I have the honour of addressing the notable and esteemed Lady Fara Devanon?' he said, his tone high, slightly wheezy, like wind in a hollow reed.

'To whom would I be responding, sir?' replied Varlan with a demure smile.

The man returned the smile broadly, though the gesture did not reach his eyes. Varlan thought it gave him the aspect of a frightened ape.

'My lady,' he said, 'we are aides to the Lord High Arbitrator Nengahem Sannra, Planetary Governor of Chiaro under His Holiness the Emperor of Mankind. My name is Suliman, though you may call me Sul if it pleases you. I am Aide Primaris to the Lord High Arbitrator.'

'Then I bid you well met, Sul, and I ask what business you have with me. I have only just arrived from a seven-week warp journey. You will understand if suitable lodgings and rest are my current priority.'

Sul dipped his bald, liver-spotted head. He was not a young man. 'Indeed, ma'am,' he said. 'But perhaps, on that very matter, I can speak to your benefit, for my lord has sent me to ask that you and your party take accommodation in his Cholixe apartments. So fine and noble a visitor is rare on Chiaro, and my lord wishes to extend to you his hospitality. He tells me that the Houses of Sannra and Devanon may actually be related through a distant link with House Nandol.'

Varlan allowed herself a smile at that, well aware that her own master had arranged for this false information to be inserted into the relevant archives during her voyage here. 'Indeed. My paternal grandfather mentioned such to me once, as I recall. We lament the passing of House Nandol. Much was lost when they fell into ruin.'

Sul's expression spoke of a sorrow unfelt, but well feigned, 'Much was lost,' he echoed, 'but perhaps not all if a distant connection would persuade you to

accept my lord's courtesy.'

Varlan had already decided it suited her to accept. Whatever lay ahead for her, currying the favour of the supreme authority on the planet ought to prove valuable. If not, it would further cement her false identity at the very least.

'Then the offer is accepted with gratitude,' she told Sul. 'However, I have certain commercial interests to which I must first attend. They should not take up more than an hour or so.' Here, she gestured to the tall stacks of metal crates to the left of the drop-shuttle – her cargo, already unloaded by the space port's servitors and slaves. Each crate bore the interlocking three-moon design of the seal of her purported House. 'Confer with my aide,' she said, indicating Myrda. 'When my business here is concluded, we shall be glad to follow your directions to the Lord High Arbitrator's estate.'

'You need follow no directions, my lady,' said Sul. 'We have armoured transports awaiting your leisure. We shall take you to my lord's apartments ourselves if you've no objection. But, please, do not hurry yourself on our account. We are instructed to wait as long as need be.'

*Armoured,* thought Varlan. *He needn't have said that. Interesting that he chose to. It seems all is not well on Chiaro, and the planetary governor is aware of it. Let us hope he is as free with his tongue as he is with his accommodation.*

'Your master's kindness is much appreciated,' Varlan told the little man. 'As is your service. Myrda? If you would, my dear.'

Myrda stepped forwards, introduced herself to the men in blue, and herded them away from the interrogator. Varlan maintained a grateful smile until their backs were turned. Then she spoke in urgent undertones to Oroga, who remained by her side.

'The cargo?' she asked.

'It will be taken to a storage facility close to the city centre,' answered Oroga in his deep baritone. 'The port servitors will start loading it onto freight cars as soon as you give the word. The buyers' representatives will inspect it this evening.'

'Have the servitors start loading at once. As for the buyers, encourage a bidding war for the sake of our cover. The sale itself is in your hands. Allow it to drag on if you can. We've no idea how much time we'll need here. If matters on Chiaro require our attention long-term, we'll have to contrive a solid pretence. Have you contacted the asset?'

Oroga nodded. 'Yes, ma'am. He was waiting for us nearby. I received a coded burst transmission three minutes after we landed. He seems well informed. He

has secured a meeting place and awaits you there now. Access is by a small equipment storage hut to the left of the main arrivals building. It's just over there. You should be able to slip inside without drawing attention. Use the building's shadow. I've remotely disabled the appropriate lumes.'

Varlan turned and looked over at a little concrete block with a metal door, hardly discernable at all but for the lamps around the landing port's perimeter and the lit windows of the arrival and departure buildings.

*Cholixe is so dark, she thought. Eternal twilight. No true day. No true night. That ought to serve us well. Always in shadow are the affairs of the Inquisition conducted.*

'Neither myself nor Myrda had time to green-light the structure, ma'am,' said Oroga. 'Give the word and I shall go in your stead.'

'We're sure Asset 16 sent the message?'

'Identicode verification was immediate. It was a Thanatos-level code. Those codes are still listed green. They have not been compromised.'

'Then I will go alone.' She tapped her throat three times and Oroga nodded. He reached up and tapped his own twice. In her ear, Varlan heard the clicks.

*Good. We have line-of-sight comms at least.*

The implanted vox-comms augmentation she shared with her two aides was working as intended for now. She'd test it from inside the rendezvous structure to verify non-LoS capability. She didn't hold out much hope, however. Chiaro's rare metals were known to cause problems with small-scale, non-shielded communications devices.

'We'll take advantage of the Lord High Arbitrator's offer for now,' she told Oroga. 'See where that leads us. I'll know more once I debrief Asset 16. Now, walk with me towards the arrivals building. When I break away for the rendezvous, keep walking to the main door, then wait for me in the shadows there. I'll vox if I need you.'

'I'll be ready,' said Oroga, falling into step.

'I know you will,' said Varlan, and she set off across the dark rockcrete.

Having dismissed his pilot, ordering the man to get some rest, Higgan Dozois used the cargo shuttle's forward vid-picters to watch Lady Fara discreetly from the cockpit. On the main monitor, he saw her strike out for the arrivals building, then peel away from her aide, the male one, as they entered thick shadow. For a moment, he lost sight of her there. Then he saw movement – a door quickly opened and quickly shut, a slender figure passing within. He would not have

seen anything at all but for the very dimmest orange glow of a work-lume somewhere inside the small square structure.

That was a utility hut. What was she doing? Why hadn't she gone straight to passenger processing?

From that moment, he discovered a burning need within him, a fire fed by seven weeks of frustration. There was something strange about Lady Fara Devanon, he convinced himself. He should have seen it before. She was not *right* somehow.

He decided a foolish thing then.

He decided to make her business his own.

## 10

Hour after endless hour the Space Marines drilled; over and over again in every conceivable form of close combat and small-unit special operations. The programme was organised into ten-hour cycles. First, the trainees would assemble in the main chapel for fifteen minutes of litany led by a senior Watch Chaplain called Qesos, a tall Space Marine of the Revilers Chapter with an unusually narrow frame and gaunt features. Despite his somewhat spare physique, his words smote the dank air of the nave like hammer on anvil, firing the blood of the assembled Space Marines for the rigours of the exercises to come.

After prayers, in which they petitioned the Emperor and the primarchs for increases in their already formidable skills, the Space Marines would assemble in the East Auditorium – a large skylighted hall hung with banners and pennants recalling the most glorious endeavours of those who had been trained here in days past. It was here, in this auditorium, facing the newest oath-takers on the tiered stone benches, that the Watch captains would announce the cycle's squad allocations and outline the training ahead. After this, there would be stern reminders, if any were needed, of the codes and strictures under which all those accepted into the Watch were expected to operate. During these, there were no small amount of side glances cast between bitter rivals. Already, Brother Keanor of the Dark Angels had engaged in unsanctioned combat — too artful to be labelled brawling — with brothers from not one but three other Chapters. Likewise Brother Iddecai of the Minotaurs had been involved in his fair share of violent encounters, though in his particular case, it was clear to all that Iddecai had been the instigator each time.

The Watch Council punished these infractions through a combination of verbal denouncement – a stain on the honour of those involved – and something far, far worse. For as many cycles as was deemed necessary, the transgressor was incarcerated in a Penance Box – essentially a coffin, of height and width barely greater than his own. Locked in and fitted with a heavy psychostim helm, he was forced to endure sensorium feeds in which brothers from his own Chapter faced off against overwhelming enemy forces. These feeds had been recorded during real wars in days long past, and the penitent Space Marine sentenced to endure

them now was helpless to do anything as he saw and felt those around him – his blood, his kin – cut to pieces by enemy fire or torn to red tatters by claw and fang. It was a terrible punishment, for it struck at the very heart of the those who received it.

Brotherhood: was there anything more important to a Space Marine? One fought for the Emperor, true. But one died for one's brothers.

Even Iddecai, forced to experience the three hundred years-past slaughter of over sixty fellow Minotaurs at the hands of a vast eldar host, found the burning anguish too much to bear. It quickly dampened his hunger for picking fights with other Deathwatch trainees.

Karras had wondered if he, too, would be punished after the incident with the Ultramarine. But, due in great measure to the phrasing of Kulle's report, it did not come to that. At the end of the exercise at kill-block Ophidion, Kulle had ordered him to the apothecarion so that his implant might be examined and, despite appearing to function as expected, be replaced.

Karras had accepted the new implant in cold silence tinged with a mixture of resentment and lingering shame.

With prayers and tencycle squad allocations over, the Space Marines would leave the East Auditorium, moving to pre-arranged assembly points in the groups to which they had been assigned. There, a Watch sergeant would brief them further and accompany them to the relevant training facility. Most of the Deathwatch training in those first hundred cycles centred around the kill-blocks. There were over thirty of them, each of varying size and complexity, each configurable to a given scenario. No Chapter in all Imperial space boasted such fine training facilities, but then no Chapter placed such singular emphasis on covert anti-xenos operations. Stormraven drops, special weapons and equipment training, fast-roping, stealth infiltration, asset recovery, assassination – all this and much more, the new arrivals studied and practised over and over until it came as natural to them as breathing. They learned fast, for even among Space Marines they were the chosen elite, and here were taught the skills that separated Deathwatch operatives from all others. This was a war fought not face to bloodied face on the battlefield, where superior force and top-down strategy won the day, but behind the lines, from the shadows, sudden and brief and scalpel-precise.

After physical training, usually lasting five to six hours per cycle, the trainees were given individual programmes of Librarius study. The Damaroth Archive had the distinction of being one of the top two repositories for xenos-related

material in the entire segmentum, the other being located at the local Ordo Xenos headquarters on Talasa Prime. But this period of study contained far more than simple book-learning. The Deathwatch Librarian had at its disposal an incredible archive of sensorium recordings taken from human-xenos conflicts across the Imperium. Some of these dated back to the very earliest days of the Deathwatch, back to when the Imperium was still groggily pushing itself to its feet after the treachery of Horus and his faithless cohorts, and the enshrinement of the Emperor upon the Golden Throne.

The sensorium records – the very same resource used for punishment – provided a level of education that was unmatched. Seated in stone chairs with psychostim helmets on their heads, Karras and the others would relive hellish battles through the senses of Space Marines long gone. As with the Penance Box, they could not influence these recordings. The battlefields they walked had gone quiet long ago. They were observers only, but the bloodshed that unfolded all around them was heart-stoppingly vivid – the sights, the smells, the sounds, everything.

They saw through the eyes of a stoic Black Templar as he and his brothers were finally gunned down by tau battlesuits on a desert salt pan beneath triple suns. Had they executed a fighting retreat they might just have survived. Pride made them stand their ground and the price was their lives. The lesson, though fatal to those who taught it, was not wasted.

In other recordings, they lived through the final moments of a tyranid assault on a missile defence base at a classified location somewhere in Ultramar. The forces of the Ultramarines Fourth Company held on as long as they could for air support that never came. Karras winced as a pair of huge, slavering jaws closed over the legs of the Space Marine through whose senses he was experiencing the dreadful rout. The Ultramarine had been bitten in half at the waist and swallowed in two twitching pieces. Throne alone knew how anyone had recovered his helmet and the data crystal it contained.

They witnessed, too, the lethally methodical advance of the deadly necrons. Those skeletal figures of black metal bone seemed to press forwards almost lazily. They never charged at speed – so utterly sure of victory, of the irresistible force they represented. Time and again, it seemed the Space Wolves that fought them were making progress, only for the thin black bodies on the ground to rise up and take arms again, corpses called endlessly back to life. Nothing would avail the Space Wolves. They fell back, dying as they gave ground.

All this and more, Karras and the others lived through, feeling the pain and

loss of those whose experiences they distantly relived. These were some of the hardest sessions for Karras, for he could do nothing to help the brave Space Marines. He felt fresh pity for those brothers, such as Iddecai, forced to experience the loss of their Chapter brothers in a Penance Box. These were battles lost to time, and yet, through the sensorium feeds, they seemed as real and as tangible as the stone armrests beneath his straining, white-knuckled hands. Often after such a session, despite none of them originating with his own noble order, he would rise from the stone chair riddled with grief, blazing with anger, fists clenched, desperately seeking an enemy to kill in revenge for what he had seen. He was far from alone in this. These sessions were harrowing in the extreme. Though the Watch Council made sure to filter the experiences by Chapter, ensuring that only the perpetrators of misdemeanours witnessed the loss of their kin, still many cried out in raw anguish and struggled against the titanium bindings that kept them restrained. It mattered not that the dying wore different colours, different iconography, and spoke with accents unfamiliar. The effect was powerful all the same.

The Watch Librarians, Lochaine foremost among them, insisted it was necessary. No one was exempt; not by Chapter, not by rank. The sessions became hated, for they represented all that was worst about defeat: the loss of great heroes, the helplessness, the grief, anger and guilt.

Despite all this distress, Karras quickly came to see the value of these feeds. No one could deny the effects. Seeing how each xenos breed fought first-hand was absolutely invaluable. Karras vicariously looked straight into the alien eyes of several threat-species he had never even heard of. He learned how they moved, how they struck, the weapons they wielded. But it went beyond that. Something else happened that was, perhaps, more significant still.

Despite their differences, the Space Marines started to come together.

Like several others, Karras was, at one point, even compelled to approach Solarion. He did this after enduring the horrific feed from the Ultramarines Fourth Company.

‘Do not speak,’ he told Solarion, cornering him in the Refectory. ‘I need no response. I wish only to tell you this: your brothers fought like gods of war. The sacrifice of those that fell is a testament to the glory of your Chapter. My brothers and I would have been proud to fight beside them.’

That was it. He turned and left immediately, still moved by what he had seen, not wishing to give the Ultramarine a chance to sour the sentiment.

Typically, after two or three hours of archival and sensorium study, the Space

Marines would once again return to the main chapel to give thanks for all they had learned. Many who had stood in that same gloomy echoing space only eight hours earlier returned bearing fresh injuries of varying severity. The training was extreme because Deathwatch operations, by their very nature, were extreme. Yet no deaths occurred. There had not been a Space Marine death on Damaroth for over a century, for the Watch could ill afford to lose even a single battle-brother seconded to its ranks. This did not mean, however, that it could not push them to the very edge. Often, the Rothi would filter silently into the chapel after the post-training litanies were complete to clean congealed blood from the smooth marble flagstones.

After these litanies, the Space Marines would move to the Refectorium where, once per ten-hour cycle, they would consume a bowl of nutrient-dense gruel or, if they wished to eat alone, could acquire a meal-replacement block and return with it to their cells. These meal-replacements were affectionately known as bricks, and the name was well earned. They were the length and width of a typical Space Marine's index finger, coloured like sandstone and grooved deeply so that they could be broken into three smaller chunks. They were textured like sandstone, too – rough, gritty and requiring significant pressure from the jaw muscles to break them down.

At first, Karras took his with iced water, eating back in the silence of his sparse quarters. After the first dozen cycles, however, he decided he was missing a unique opportunity and began to eat regularly in the Refectorium among his fellows. It did not serve anyone, he told himself, to hide away in solitude. A kill-team was a team. He would live and die by the honour and skill of the Space Marines who served beside him. With that in mind, he made efforts to get to know those around him, at the very least by sight. Mostly, he just observed them, for few seemed willing to approach. Librarians often found themselves segregated, even within their own Chapters, for the feelings their powers generated in their Chapter brothers were conflicting in nature.

*Tolerate not the psyker, the witch, the shaman. Their power is the gateway to madness and corruption.*

And yet, were Librarians not the supreme embodiment of anti-xenos war: soldiers whose physical talents were matched only by their psychic weaponry? Most alien species represented a threat on both counts. Only the psyker was capable of combating the latter aspect effectively.

Seated in the Refectorium cycle after cycle with the stone benches empty on either side of him, it was apparent to Karras that, in their discomfort at his

presence, these elite battle-brothers were not so different from many others he had known, and he took to reading ancient texts from the Watch Librarian to distract himself from their prejudice as he ate.

But there were exceptions. During one such meal, with the Refectorium at only a third of its capacity, he met for the first time the most unusual and irreverent Space Marine he had ever encountered.

‘The one that bloodied Prophet’s lip,’ said the figure that suddenly appeared in front of him.

Karras looked up from his gruel and across the stone table. Before him stood a striking battle-brother in a black tunic belted with silver. In his hands, he held a clay bowl and spoon like those on the table in front of Karras.

‘Prophet?’ Karras asked, confused.

‘The Ultramarine you threw into a wall.’

‘Ignacio Solarion,’ said Karras. His brow creased. ‘Do you seek to shame me with such a reminder? Very well. I admit I was wrong to lose my composure. What is that to you?’

The stranger, ignoring the warning tone, asked if he might sit. Despite his misgivings, Karras gestured to the bench on the other side of the table. The other Space Marine dropped onto it, smiling to himself. His skin was as white as sun-bleached bone, exactly the shade of Karras’s own. The similarities stopped there, however. While Karras’s eyes were blood red, even where they should have been white, this battle-brother’s eyes were a solid, flawless black, like two spheres of pure polished obsidian. They were the same black as his long shimmering hair – hair that lay like a silk mantle on his shoulders. Karras was as bald as a knarloc egg. It was genetic. All Death Spectres went bald during the gene-seed implant process.

*Damned impractical,* thought Karras, staring at all that long, shining hair. *What vanity! And look at that face. Not a single scar. Surely this one has never been tested. Surely he is too young and inexperienced to be here.*

It was a remarkable face for more than just its lack of scars, and for more than the rare friendliness apparent in its expression, too. The unblemished face stared back at Karras with an apparent openness the Death Spectre had seen nowhere else since his arrival.

*Something familiar,* Karras thought. *Like Ithoric’s White Champion. Or Gorlon Xie’s Olympiarch.*

Karras was no stranger to the works of the Great Sculptors. For ten thousand years, the worlds of the Imperium had produced a few men each generation in

whose hands simple stone became works of such beauty and perfection that they inspired the populations of whole segmenta. Most of these men were eventually commissioned to produce inspirational military works for the Adeptus Munitorum, as much to boost morale as to immortalise the noteworthy. The glorious diorama of Macharius and Sejanus on Ultima Macharia – the famous *End of the Long March* – was one such example, much imitated in the years following its unveiling, but never bettered.

The face of the Space Marine sitting opposite Karras now was more suited to such a sculpture than to a trained killer or living war-machine. Silky black hair framed a forehead of respectable height, a noble brow, a sharp slender nose and a mouth neither too wide nor too small. The planes of the cheekbones were smooth and superbly proportioned. Such symmetry there. Were it not for the all-black eyes, Karras could almost have believed this brother a masterpiece of statuary come to life.

The stranger noted Karras studying him and laughed.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Too good-looking for the Deathwatch. But don’t let that fool you.’

Karras raised an eyebrow.

‘Don’t mistake this perfection for a badge of inexperience. You were thinking that very thing. Not so?’

‘You have the Gift yourself, then,’ said Karras with some humour, ‘to read others so well.’

‘I’m gifted all right, but not in the way you mean. I’ll leave sorcery to the likes of you, witchkin.’ Karras stiffened at the word, but detected no malice in the tone. ‘I’m just used to dealing with false assumptions,’ the stranger went on.

‘The only Space Marines I’ve seen without a scar on their faces are neophytes,’ countered Karras. ‘It doesn’t last long.’

‘That should tell you something,’ said the battle-brother.

‘It would tell me that you’re a neophyte,’ said Karras, ‘but the Deathwatch does not recruit neophytes.’

The black-haired battle-brother shovelled a spoonful of thick, sludgy gruel into his mouth.

‘You’d think they could add some flavour to the damned stuff,’ he groaned. Then, after another swallow, added, ‘We share blood, you and I.’

Karras nodded. The colourless skin was the giveaway. Gene-seed mutation. Another reason certain others kept their distance. ‘It would seem so. Raptors, perhaps? Revilers?’

The other tutted. ‘Now why would you think that? Raven Guard, I’ll have you know.’

Karras cursed. Given the stranger’s breezy manner, how could he possibly have guessed it? He dropped his spoon in his bowl and stood. Dutifully, and in accordance with ancient tradition, he raised right hand to left pectoral, bowed his head, and intoned gravely, ‘We look to Corax and pray for his return. We of the Death Spectres honour the seed that made us.’

The Raven Guard’s smile weakened for a moment. He gestured for Karras to sit. A few others in the Refectorum looked over.

‘We honour the brothers born of our roots,’ he replied. ‘May Corax take pride in them and all they do.’ It was appropriate in response but not so much in the way it was said. ‘Relax, brother. I don’t stand much on formality. You’ve obeyed the forms. Let us put them aside where they belong. How old are you, by the way?’

He spooned another mouthful of gruel into his mouth.

Karras sat stunned. What manner of Raven Guard was this?

‘Why did you approach me?’ he asked, ignoring the other’s question.

‘Why not? You were eating alone. Not being shunned, are you?’ He looked around almost theatrically, pretending to fear that anyone might see them together. ‘Actually, I just wanted to meet the Space Marine who overloaded his implant and bloodied Prophet’s nose. He had it coming. If not from you...’

‘You keep calling him Prophet,’ said Karras. ‘I don’t understand.’

The Raven Guard snorted. ‘He makes more predictions than a back-alley palm-reader. *You’re making an error. This strategy will fail. I told you so. Exactly as I foresaw. If you had listened to me...*

‘Ah,’ said Karras. ‘I’m sure he is delighted with the name.’

‘Revels in it,’ said the Raven Guard with obvious pleasure.

‘And do I have a nickname?’ asked Karras.

The Raven Guard indicated the weathered old volume Karras had lain aside while they talked. ‘I’ve taken to calling you Scholar,’ he said. ‘A little obvious, I admit.’

‘Perhaps, but at least I won’t take offence.’

‘I should have tried harder,’ said the Raven Guard, flashing perfect teeth.

He half turned and pointed out a number of others in the Refectorum, quoting their nicknames to Karras. Some were obscure and needed explanation, just as Prophet’s had, but others were simple, some bordering on the openly offensive, others given in respect of a particular talent or skill. Of these latter, the last that

Karras learned was the nickname of a squat, bulky battle-brother of the Imperial Fists. He was sitting in the far corner with a Black Templar.

‘Omni,’ said the Raven Guard.

‘Why that?’

‘You haven’t trained with him yet? About the only thing he *can*’t do is fit into narrow spaces.’ At this, he laughed. ‘Heavy weapons, explosives, communications, vehicles, repairs, encryption. I guess he’s making up for being so damned short. It looks like his body grew outwards rather than upwards, doesn’t it?’

‘There’s one name you haven’t told me,’ said Karras, leaning forwards, eyebrow raised.

The Raven Guard made a short bow from his seat.

‘My name is Zeed, brother. Siefer Zeed.’

Karras extended his hand and they briefly gripped wrists.

‘Well met, Brother Zeed, but don’t pretend you haven’t earned a nickname yourself. Or are you somehow excluded?’

Zeed had apparently decided he was finished with his gruel. He rose from the stone bench and stepped backwards over it, still facing Karras. He left his bowl on the table.

‘They call me Ghost,’ he said.

It was Karras’s turn to laugh. ‘And why do they call you that I wonder? As well to call me the same, given the skin colour we share.’

‘It’s not that, Scholar,’ said Zeed, strangely serious all of a sudden. ‘Not at all.’

He turned to leave, but paused a moment and spoke over his shoulder.

‘Watch for me in the combat pits if you have the chance. See me fight. You’ll see why they call me Ghost... and why this face bears no scars.’

With that, he strode off, leaving Karras to wonder at the strange encounter. Zeed stopped at a few other tables on his way out, greeting battle-brothers from various Chapters, always with a quip or remark. Some shared his good humour. A White Scar by the name of Brother Khaigur particularly enjoyed whatever it was that Zeed said to him, laughing uproariously and pounding the table with big calloused hands. Others merely glared until Zeed moved away. Of those who showed little patience with him, surliest of all was the Ultramarine, Ignacio Solarion. *Prophet*. Karras hadn’t noticed him enter the Refectorum. It must have been within the last few minutes. He was seated at a far table beside a small group of Space Marines from progenitor Chapters. Karras saw warriors from the Novamarines and the Sons of Orar among them.

Whatever it was that Zeed said to Solarion, it was clearly far from politic. Solarion snarled aggressively and made to rise, but the Novamarine seated next to him said something back and the Raven Guard shrugged and moved off. Solarion then turned his glare towards Karras, a look that was difficult to read.

*If not for this damned implant...*

Karras opted not to return the look. Would that he could undo the whole mess.

*We should reserve our hate for the xenos, he thought. Not for each other. Among those who share a sacred duty to mankind, it should never be so.*

He left the Refectorium with half an hour to spare before the beginning of the next cycle. He would sleep for fifteen minutes, he decided. Even so short a rest would allow him to begin the next cycle rejuvenated and ready, his fatigue falling away, minor tissue damage naturally mending. Such was the enhanced constitution of a Space Marine.

But he didn't sleep. Not even for a minute. He settled only into a dissatisfying attempt which was thwarted as his mind turned over all the complications he had encountered thus far. All his notions, all his preconceptions...

Perhaps things would change after the taking of Second Oath. Perhaps after he officially donned the black and was assigned to a kill-team proper... Maybe then everything would change.

Time, of course, would teach him the folly of that belief.

## 11

Varlan heard the plasteel door click shut behind her as she stepped into the close air and the dim orange glow. All around her, pipes, ducts and snaking wires traced a complex dance on the walls and ceilings, twisting and flowing together like a nest of mating snakes frozen solid mid-coitus. Before her, in the centre of the floor, a metal stair with twin handrails led down into the space port's service tunnels. Like the interior of the concrete hut itself, the tunnel section below was lit by work-lumes – lambent spheres set in the ceiling, recessed, spaced every few metres.

As her boot heels rang on the fourth metal stair, a freight train must have arrived at the space port. She could feel the vibration of the massive vehicle through the handrails as it came to a stop. Good. Her cargo of industrial supplies would be on its way to a city warehouse within the hour. All part of her cover.

At the bottom of the metal steps, she set foot on the stone floor of the underground tunnel. Cautiously, but without actual stealth, she pressed on. She wore no weapons on hip or thigh, not while playing the role of Lady Fara, but then Shianna Varlan was herself a weapon, trained and conditioned on her birth world to superb ability by the finest Darguu[\[16\]](#) master, T'shon Elisur. The Ordo appreciated that, and had built on it with advanced training of their own. If her close-quarters combat abilities were inadequate to neutralise the dangers she faced, the micro-weapons concealed in the rings on either index finger ought to equalise things a little.

She doubted she would need such weapons here. Oroga had assured her that Asset 16's codes were still listed as uncompromised. Unless the asset had been broadcasting under duress, the information exchange ought to be a simple matter of protocol.

As if summoned by that very thought, a shadowy shape moved into view at the tunnel junction up ahead. Varlan's heartbeat sped just a fraction. The figure moved into a pool of weak lume-light and stopped. There it stood, awaiting her, back hunched, waist bent, its lopsided shoulders sitting a little too far forwards on its torso. A twisted, impure shape. Varlan felt a wave of revulsion pass through her. From infancy, one was taught to hate the mutant, the heretic, the psyker. The latter, she had come to believe, could be noble and great; His

Lordship's astropaths and Navigators, for example, wielded their strange powers only for the good of mankind. The mutant and the heretic, however, were cancers rooted in the very bones of the human race.

*And this one is a mutant! A twist!*

As she neared him, her revulsion grew.

She stopped two metres from him, noting that he held a compact autopistol levelled at her heart. At this range, depending on the type of rounds he was using, even one shot might lethally pierce the armour mesh woven into her clothes. At least he was cautious, a professional. Both had doubts that needed assuaging before they could proceed.

Without raising her hands from her side, Varlan made a series of gestures with her fingers. The last two represented her callsign for this operation:

*White Phoenix.*

The little hunchback nodded and, without lowering his weapon, gave a brief finger-sequence of his own with his free hand.

Varlan indicated her satisfaction with a nod and breached the silence between them. 'You'll not need the weapon with me, Sixteen. Let us conclude our business quickly. Ready your opticom for transfer.'

The little man hesitantly tucked his pistol in his waistband, lifted a hand to one eye, and removed the flexible layer of artificial pupil, iris and white that hid the cybernetic augmentation beneath. Lifting her right hand, Shianna Varlan did the same. There they stood for a moment, two very different human beings dedicated to service in the same cause. Varlan towered over Asset 16. She was a living expression of good genetics, of beauty, health and great physical aptitude. He was a bent wretch, barely able to look her in the eye without twisting his ugly head sideways. But His Lordship had use for both, and that was reason enough for Varlan to put aside pride. She took a knee so that their eyes drew level, the better to facilitate a quick, steady transfer without errors.

'Are you ready?' she asked.

In answer, Asset 16 leaned towards her until their opticoms were aligned. A bridge of red laser light appeared between them, lens-to-lens, and the transfer began.

Varlan absorbed it all. She could not consciously process everything as it entered her brain – there was far too much data travelling at speed into the area of her memory assigned to such work – a storage partition, as she thought of it – but, turning a part of her attention to the dataflow, she managed to catch a significant amount.

The transfer lasted eight seconds, the longest she'd ever experienced, and she hadn't been prepared for the nature of the content. The things that Sixteen had seen, had done... As the red bridge blinked out of existence, she fell backwards on her rump, her composure broken. She was breathing in gasps.

'You... I saw... I...'

Asset 16 – Ordimas Arujo, as she now knew him to be – shrugged his misshapen shoulders. He seemed suddenly weary, almost on the verge of collapse, wracked with all he had endured. And rightly so, Varlan judged.

'What would you have done, interrogator?' There was bitterness, even loathing in his voice, but directed at himself, not at her. His actions sickened him. Yet what choice had there been? 'Had I refused, they would have known me for an infiltrator and slain me. And you would come here blind, groping in the frozen dark for the intelligence I have just provided. Would you have acted any different?'

As Varlan pushed herself to her feet, he looked her up and down, taking in her lines, but without any of the animal hunger so obvious in the eyes of men like Captain Dozois. 'As a woman, you would have fared much worse than I under the circumstances.'

She wasn't about to deceive herself. She knew exactly what he meant and shivered in acknowledgment. If the Ordo had sent a female infiltrator...

'I understand what you did,' she told him, 'but it sickens my soul.'

'Do you think it sickens mine any less? Or do you think I enjoyed it? A twisted body reflects a twisted mind – is that not what the Ecclesiarchy tells us?'

'I see your value well enough.'

'You see the value of the mutation, not the man. I risk my life for those that hate me, but a curse on all mutants will come no slower to your lips, I'll wager.'

'Don't presume to know me,' she thundered, angry at his accusation, uncomfortable with the truth in it. 'You will be well rewarded for your success, I'm sure. I came here only for the information you were carrying. Now I have it.'

*Though I wish, in the name of all the saints, that I did not.*

She found herself struggling with the more dreadful images now stored in her mind. Flashes of his terrible experience kept forcing themselves to the forefront of her awareness, insisting on her attention.

'You were joined with one of them,' she murmured. 'One of the women, the Infected. In front of that foul congregation, you...'

Ordimas's face twisted.

'Don't tell me what I did,' he hissed at Varlan through clenched teeth. 'I know

it, and I know *why* I did it too, may the Emperor wash the stain from my soul. I was under His Lordship's direct orders, as you are now. Would you have had me disobey?'

*He guesses my thoughts, my inner struggle. He reminds me of my own duty so I will not kill him.*

Her mind spun. She was an interrogator. It was one of her sworn duties to kill those who partook in such sinister rites. They were heretics and traitors. Any tribunal in the Imperium would have condemned such a man to torture and death. But this Ordimas was an Ordo asset. He belonged to His Lordship. He lived and died by His Lordship's command. One did not overstep the boundaries of that authority and expect to live.

She could see it all as if the memories were her own: the kidnapping of the other work-crew deep down in the mines; the cart journey into abandoned Arraphel; the strange congregation kneeling in the darkness and the freezing cold.

The sensory data from Ordimas's opticom showed her all this and the rest. She saw the massive cloaked men haul their prisoners off into the dark tunnel. She saw women move to stand on the platform. She saw the tall, strange man – their high-priest or equivalent – moving among his flock, selecting from among them with a touch on the cheek. She saw the chosen leave the throng and moved to stand on the platform, each beside one of the women.

Then the tall man stopped in front of Asset 16.

Ordimas had looked into the face of the cult leader.

The strange priest's irises were a vivid, shimmering gold, the black pupils not round, but shaped like the fluted glass vessel of an hourglass. They were striking: so icy, so composed; so absolutely lacking in doubt or weakness. There were no eyelashes, no eyebrows. The tall man was utterly hairless.

*It was no man, thought Varlan. It was something else. Unnatural. Inhuman.* She had already begun to suspect what.

'The Master calls upon you, Mykal Durst,' the cult leader had said softly to Ordimas. His gaze flicked briefly to the fake tattoo on Ordimas's neck. She felt the memory of Ordimas's panic. Had the ink smudged? Did the strange priest see through his ruse? 'Stand with one of your sisters. Give, now, in the service of He who raised you up from misery and ignorance. Swell our ranks so that we might know His paradise all the sooner.'

Varlan knew the asset's abject terror as she lived through his memories. Every fibre of him screamed out in fear and horror. His body had wanted to turn and

flee, but his mind held on, if only by the thinnest of threads.

*Incredible that he retained control!*

Knowing that the only other option was discovery and death, Ordimas had taken his place on the stone platform, sick with self-loathing, shivering in the chill air. Varlan saw what followed, saw it through the asset's eyes while he, in turn, saw it through the gene-copied eyes of a dead miner.

What passed on the platform made her gut clench like a vice. All those others, watching in unholy rapture as the ritual proceeded. She knew Ordimas's struggle, knew how close his mind had come to being torn apart.

She thought of the strange children his opticom had recorded in the market square, and knew many such children would follow. From that alone, she knew also the nature of the threat on Chiaro. Asset 16 did not quite see the full picture. He saw the presence of a threat, but not the extent of it. All to the good. Better for this one if he lived the rest of his days in ignorance. As it was, she guessed he would not live long. Whatever substance or activity he turned to seeking distraction from the horror – be it alcohol, drugs or adrenaline – it would eventually kill him.

*The truly haunted rarely escape their ghosts.*

She forced her mind back to the present and found him staring at her, open concern written on his lumpy face. How long had she been submerged in his past? Long enough by half. It was time to go. The little mutant's weariness had settled over her like a fog.

'Your work in Cholixe is done,' she told him. 'I commend you for your sacrifice. His Lordship chose well, as always.'

The hunchback snorted. 'I wish he'd chosen someone else.'

'If you have personal affairs here, deal with them swiftly and make ready to depart. The ship on which I arrived, the *Macedon*, ought to be leaving within the week. Negotiate passage to the nearest commercial hub. The captain is a greedy man. He will accept your business despite any prejudices, providing the fee is substantial enough. I'm sure His Lordship will call on you before long.'

'Will you be on that ship?' Ordimas asked, voice not quite flat enough to hide the fact that he asked out of concern for her.

Varlan's expression hardened. 'Do not pity me and do not fear for me. There is dangerous work here, but it is work I was trained for.'

How she wished she felt such confidence. In the face of what nested here, what bred here, she could not. 'Do you have adequate funds?'

'A transfer was made yesterday. I have all I need for now.'

‘Then our business is concluded. Emperor light your way.’

She was about to turn from him, set to return the way she had come, when a strong, long-fingered hand on her arm stopped her. She recoiled a little by reflex from the mutant’s touch, but only briefly.

Ordimas was looking up at her, head tilted awkwardly so he could meet her eyes. She noticed that his opticom was covered once again with its false layer, reminding her to do likewise.

Ordimas licked his lips anxiously. ‘You are proud and strong, interrogator. You embody all the finest qualities of the Inquisition. I can see that. But heed my words for your own sake, I beg you. If you must go down into the mines, go down in force. His Lordship has potent military assets at his disposal. You know of whom I speak. Call them here if you can. This corruption, this infection... It goes far beyond what I have seen. I’ve barely scratched the surface, and yet my part has been played to its end. Yours is just beginning. Guard your life, my lady. It would sadden me to know such beauty had succumbed to such ugliness.’

Both stood silent for a moment, a grim tableau in orange and black, the asset’s hand still on Varlan’s arm, his words hanging in the cold air between them. Somewhere deeper along the tunnels, generators thrummed, seeming louder now than before. Another freight train rumbled by on the surface. Varlan moved, lowering her arm so that Ordimas’s hand slid away. She thought she knew what had moved him to speak. It wasn’t just her death. Everyone died sometime, and there was no sorrow to be found in giving one’s life in the service of the Emperor. No, not that. The hunchback was referring to a fate far darker, the most vile and unholy of exploitations. Against that, death was a blessing.

She couldn’t afford to let that fear take root. She galvanised herself against it. She was an interrogator, class 3, of the Ordo Xenos of the Emperor’s own Holy Inquisition.

Stiffening, she said, ‘I will not succumb. Be sure of that.’

There was fresh grit in her voice, mixed with ice and fire. The little mutant blinked at her, his warning given, nothing left to say.

Varlan turned and began walking back down the tunnel. She spoke over her shoulder only once.

‘Farewell, Sixteen. You do not know me. You have not seen me.’

Ordimas bowed to her retreating back, then vanished.

She listened a moment to the offbeat rhythm of his footfalls. They receded quickly, soon drowned out by the background noise of the space port generators and the buzzing of the overhead lumes.

She strode briskly, eager to rejoin her retinue and find a place to take repast before a much-needed sleep... If she could even manage sleep given the knowledge she had now acquired. She would need the comfort of prayers and mantras at the very least. The security she felt in the company of the twins would help, too. It always did.

In something that barely passed for a whisper, she said, 'Eagle to Shield.'

She listened. Nothing.

'Eagle to Shield,' she repeated.

Again, nothing.

'Eagle to Sword,' she tried. There was no answer.

There were two possibilities: either the tunnels and their machinery were interfering with the vox-net or her aides were incapacitated.

The latter possibility made her break into a run.

Even in heels, she was fast, running on the balls of her feet. The lamps in the ceiling rushed by her. Within moments, she reached the metal stair and flew up it, boots clanging on every second step. She reached the top and was about to throw open the door that led outside when, in her left ear, she heard a burst of static and a tinny voice repeating over and over, 'Shield to Eagle. Shield to Eagle. Do you copy?'

*Oroga.*

'Eagle copies,' she replied. 'Go ahead Shield.'

'We have a serious problem, Eagle,' voxed Oroga. 'It's an HID[17]. I think we may have been compromised.'

## 12

Karras and nineteen others were ordered to the Central Pankrateon fourteen tortuous cycles after he and Zeed had spoken in the Refectorium. The cycles between had been as brutal and exacting as anything he had so far experienced. One involved being subjected to the cold and pressure of crushing oceanic depths without any breathing apparatus, and having to complete various problems set by the Watch sergeants. There were no oceans on Damaroth, of course, but the tech-priests had managed to create immersion pods that achieved the precise effect. Karras's body drew the oxygen he needed from the icy water that flooded his lungs. It was a new experience for him, being forced to breathe water, and not something he hoped ever to repeat.

Another cycle involved sprinting through kilometres of gas-filled tunnels wearing a hundred kilos of additional weight in the form of old-fashioned, unpowered plate armour. The thick, toxic clouds that billowed from nozzles in the walls attacked his eyes, skin and nasal membrane as he pounded towards the goal, but there was no stopping, no turning back or quitting. His breathing was as shallow as he could make it while still powering his muscles. Without the implanted organs of a Space Marine, he would have fallen down dead within the first twenty metres. As it was, it took him several further cycles to feel properly recovered.

There were other exercises, too, simulating combat in the zero-G void of space, fighting teams of servitor drones in extremes of heat and cold and various types of radiation. It wasn't just a matter of combat in a range of extremes; all of these exercises included tasks to tax the mind as well as the body. The Deathwatch wanted to be sure its operatives could get the job done no matter what challenges they faced.

Compared to such withering tests, close-combat cycles in the Pankrateon sounded like a grand reprieve. Of course, they proved to be anything but. In the coming cycle, the group to which Karras was assigned would train knife, sword, double knife, double sword and empty-hand techniques under the critical eyes of Watch Sergeants Kulle and Coteaz. The latter was a veteran Deathwatch squad leader, originally of the Crimson Fists Chapter, who had famously slain an ork warboss that outweighed him six-to-one at close quarters using only a standard-

issue combat blade. The scarred mess of his face, ruined almost beyond recognisable humanity, was ample testimony; Karras could believe the story all too easily looking at that battered visage.

The Pankrateon was a massive close-combat training facility roughly cross-shaped in layout. The main area was a dark central hall, its arched ceiling some thirty metres above a stone floor stained with thousands of years of shed blood. Brothers got cut here, and not infrequently. It was a rule that the flagstones of the Pankrateon did not get washed. Blood spilled was blood honoured, a mark of commitment to the ultimate goal of all this hard work. The Pankrateon exceeded even the kill-blocks in terms of serious injuries reported and formed a part of Deathwatch training every bit as critical.

The high ceiling was supported by cylindrical pillars set eight metres apart and running in two rows down the entire length of the main hall. These were no ordinary pillars. At their base, they boasted a profusion of multi-jointed mechanical arms, each ending in a metal appendage into which could be placed a wide variety of weapons: from swords and hammers to barbed whips and great crushing claws. Set on the surface of each pillar, winking from between the paired sets of arms, were target lights. These glowed red until struck, at which point they would turn momentarily blue. With this change, the arms linked to that light would stop attacking. The servo-skull embedded in stone above the top pair of arms would register the successful strike. Then the light would change back, the arms would reactivate, and the Space Marine would find himself under full assault once again.

Karras, his fatigues growing damp with a light sweat, ducked just as his pillar sent a slashing horizontal blow at his head. Air whooshed above him. He stepped in, careful to check the movement of the other three arms he faced, and stabbed upwards with his training knife.

The tip hit the target light's hard, scratch-proof dome. It went blue and, for a second, the attacking arms froze. Karras stepped out, breathing hard, and rolled his shoulders, readying himself for the pillar-drone's next tireless assault. The pillar's embedded skull sounded a warning tone, the light flickered from blue back to red, and the arms began slicing the air once again, metal claws and sword-blades flashing.

Around Karras, his fellow Deathwatch trainees fought just as hard, grunting with effort as they pushed themselves to keep up with the fighting machines. This was training unlike anything Karras had known. Back at Logopol, the Death Spectres had trained with each other, learning from the mistakes and

successes of their kin as much as from their own. But fighting fellow Space Marines was less than ideal given the special remit of the Watch. It was the combat habits and patterns of the main xenos threats which had to be learned and overcome. Karras's pillar fought him according to a pattern taken from sensorium records of a mid-sized tyranid variant, large enough to be a serious threat, but not too large for hand-to-hand combat. Thus, four arms assailed him instead of two, and they were fast, striking like scorpion tails with lethal intent.

The Watch sergeants paced up and down the main hall, watching the unarmoured Space Marines fighting with all they had, barking at them to work harder, fight smarter.

'Keep moving, damn you!' shouted Coteaz through ragged lips. The torn flesh of his cheeks and mouth gave his voice a lisping quality. 'Footwork. Footwork. A stationary Space Marine is a dead Space Marine.'

Karras put a burst of extra energy into his movement, slipped under another assault from the arms bearing knives, and scored another strike on the middle target light. The pillar's skull beeped an alarm and froze. The light turned blue.

'Sergeant,' someone called out.

Karras looked towards the sound. Coteaz limped over to an extremely stocky Space Marine just two pillars away on the left. Then the pillar in front of Karras beeped, and the arms whistled out towards him again, abruptly recalling his attention. His training knife parried a blow that could have given him a very nasty chest wound. As he blocked and slipped another series of blistering swipes, he heard the stocky warrior speak.

'I think I broke it.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Voss. No one has ever...'

'Someone just did. Sorry, sergeant.'

'Dorn's blood! How did-?'

Karras scored another disabling hit on his foe and took the second's respite to glance again in Voss's direction.

*The Imperial Fist. The one they're calling Omni.*

Voss was by far the shortest Space Marine Karras had ever laid eyes on, but his muscular bulk went a step beyond compensation. His arms, his shoulders, his chest; every muscle group on his squat frame rippled with thick, hard mass. Back on Occludus, it would not have been tolerated. Such muscularity often came at the price of agility and speed.

Then again, perhaps not. In that oh-so-momentary glance, Karras had seen Voss holding up a mechanical arm that he had somehow ripped right out of the

training pillar. He lifted it as if offering it to Coteaz in embarrassed tribute. It was a feat that should only have been possible in power armour. Omni had used his bare hands.

Coteaz never got the chance to comment further. At that moment, Sergeant Kulle came storming out of one of the side halls and urged Coteaz to follow him.

‘You need to see this,’ he insisted.

Coteaz, noting the look in Kulle’s eyes, turned from Voss without another word and fell into step behind his fellow Watch sergeant, following him to the Pankrateon’s west chamber where one of the facility’s two sunken combat pits was located.

Two minutes later, Kulle reappeared and shouted for everyone else to follow him.

Karras withdrew from his combat-drone’s active range. The moment he stepped out of the machine’s engagement field, the scanners in the servo-skull blinked green, then off.

He fell into step behind the others as they followed Kulle through a short hall of black stone into a room with circular tiers sunk into the floor. There were five of these tiers, in the middle of which was a pit some twelve metres across and four metres deep. From the base of that pit came the sound of harsh impacts, of metal clashing, bursts of staccato sound interspersed with brief pauses. Looking at the other battle-brothers around him as he stepped to the rim, Karras noticed the hard looks on the faces of some, the knowing grins on the faces of others. Reaching the rim, he looked down and saw a whirling, darting blur of a figure being assaulted from three sides by heavy, multi-limbed close-combat servitors.

It was Siefer Zeed. *Ghost*. The alabaster skin and black-silk hair were unmistakable. Like all those present save the Watch sergeants and their Mechanicus support, Zeed wore black training fatigues. They contrasted sharply with his pale form. One of the training servitors sent a blistering diagonal axe-blow towards Zeed’s clavicle. The Raven Guard slipped it and struck the servitor’s chassis targets with three hard, open-handed blows. The servitor’s plasteel torso rang with the impacts.

One of the others servitors, this one armed with a sword and spiked shield, burst forwards while Zeed was withdrawing from the range of the other. For a moment, it looked like the servitor’s sword would bite down into Zeed’s upper back, but the Raven Guard had noticed the movement behind him. He stepped right as he spun to face his attacker, somehow still managing to keep himself just a hair beyond the range of the others, and threw out a hand to redirect the

servitor's downward force at the wrist. The sword bit into the pit's sandy floor at the very moment Zeed moved inside, checking the spiked shield with his right hand and hammering a straight left into the glowing target that represented his enemy's face.

The cybernetic drone staggered backwards, arms out for balance, only to receive a thunderous kick in its plated abdomen. It dropped hard to the sand, striking what passed for its head against the curving granite wall of the pit. There, it twitched a moment, its organic brain rocked, until subroutines kicked in and it began to right itself. In the meantime, Zeed had kicked the legs out from under the third, dropping it to its backside in front of him. It swiped at him from the ground, lashing out with the double short-swords it held, but it could not reach him. He ignored its futile attacks and focused on the axe-wielder, which had begun to close on him again.

Without turning or looking up, Zeed called out, 'Next setting, damn it! They're too slow!'

From a few metres to Karras's right, someone growled and muttered, 'Arrogant fool!'

Someone else grunted in agreement, but no one withdrew from the edge of the pit. Arrogant or not, Zeed was worthy of an audience. Karras saw that he had misjudged the strange battle-brother. That porcelain face was flawless not because he was untested or a gun-shy coward, but because no blade had ever been fast enough to touch it. The same was not true of Zeed's body. One didn't take combat to this level without paying the price. His white skin was laced like a roadmap of hundreds of scars, some broad and deep, a sign of tearing or gouging, some long and fine, where sharp blades had slashed his flesh.

On the other side of the pit's rim, Watch Sergeant Kulle glanced at Coteaz, one eyebrow raised.

'Not I,' said Coteaz to his fellow. 'I won't be responsible for the first Pankrateon death in a century.'

'He can handle it,' said Kulle. 'Look at him. See for yourself.'

Whatever look crossed Coteaz's face then, Karras couldn't read it. The grizzled old Space Marine's visage was too much of a mess to discern any clear expression, but his words were anything but vague. 'All I see is a showboater revelling in attention. The lesson here is of humility and of knowing one's limitations, as you'll see when this all turns ill.'

Karras felt Coteaz was wrong. Down in the pit, Zeed's attention was focused like a las-beam on the deadly ballet in which he had the central role. Zeed never

once looked up at the Space Marines ringing the pit, despite the supportive shouts of *Ghost!* from some of those present. The rest watched in either brooding or respectful silence. Zeed was putting his life on the line to test his capabilities and to try to move beyond them. His movements were so fast and precise they almost seemed choreographed. It was mesmerising.

No one would leave while he still fought. If Space Marines respected anything, it was proficiency in battle, and Karras doubted anyone here would honestly argue they were the equal of the Raven Guard in close quarters. Not now. How could they? Karras knew for certain that he himself was not. Had he been permitted to combine his own combat skills with the power of his gift, the story would be quite different, but that lessened Zeed's achievement not one bit.

Ignoring Coteaz's concerns, Watch Sergeant Kulle drew a slate-shaped device from a pocket on his webbing and tapped its face with his index finger. 'Program Orpheus,' he called down into the pit. 'Mind yourself, Raven Guard!'

The Space Marines around the pit could see the change that took place immediately. Activation lights on the servitors' chassis blinked in faster tempo. As aggressive as they had been earlier, they became more so now, leaping to attack in tight coordination with each other, their weapons whistling as they churned the air just inches from Zeed's unprotected flesh.

Unprotected, but fast. Despite the intensity of the new assault, Zeed was somehow always just outside their reach, or just inside the arc of their blows. It was then, once he was inside, that he would strike like bolter-fire, rattling off a rapid series of strikes to his enemies' glowing target lights. He was, in a word, incredible.

Karras didn't dare blink, such was the speed of what played out below. Zeed seemed to have fallen into a kind of trance. Though the warp field suppressor had locked away Karras's powers, he was sure he felt something from the Raven Guard. It was a kind of mindlessness, as if his noisy, cocky, boisterous personality had melted away into the substance of his surroundings. He was one with his opponents, each an inseparable part of this expression of artful violence, and as such, knew every microscopic change in their movement even as it happened. In a way, he was as much a machine now as they were. They could not touch him.

*But they do not tire, thought Karras. And pressed like this, even a Space Marine will exhaust himself eventually.*

Zeed struck the metal knee-joint of one servitor and it staggered, dropping to the ground on its other knee. The Raven Guard leapt forwards, sprang off the

downed servitor's exposed shoulder and, with the extra height and momentum, hammered a leaping kick into the head of the drone closing on his right.

Despite being deep in a battle-trance, he summoned his voice.

'Higher, damn it,' he barked up at the Watch sergeants. 'Faster. Make them faster.'

Above the clanging and ringing of the combat below, Karras heard Watch Sergeant Coteaz curse aloud.

Kulle tapped the screen of his slate again. Coteaz grabbed his shoulder. 'No one has gone higher than Orpheus against three drones,' he hissed. 'Don't do this.'

'Someone must raise the bar,' Kulle snapped back, 'or none of us will ever go beyond what we are.'

'Then his blood will stain your honour, not mine. I'll not be party to this.'

For a moment, they stood there, eyes level, communicating so much without need for words. Then Coteaz turned and pushed his way from the edge of the pit, cursing as he went.

'Program Umenides,' Kulle shouted down to Zeed. 'Extremis Ultra. You break new ground today, Raven Guard.'

The shouts of *Ghost!* became louder.

Watching all this, Karras felt a knot twist in his primary stomach. In Kulle's eyes, he now noted something he had seen many times on the battlefield: tunnel-vision. The Watch sergeant's focus had narrowed to encompass only the moment, only that which lay before him. He was not seeing the bigger picture, not staying mindful of the consequences should something go wrong. Together, complicit in this testing beyond limits, Kulle and Zeed risked too much. To have Zeed die here in a training pit, never having taken Second Oath, would stain the honour of the Deathwatch and the Raven Guard both.

Karras felt a weight settle over him. He looked at the battle-brothers on either side. They too, all of them, had eyes and minds only for the deadly game below. It was up to him, then.

Reluctant as he was, Karras began to edge around the pit towards Kulle. Those who found him suddenly blocking their view simply craned their necks to keep watching and settled again once he had passed. The ringing of hard impacts sounded again and again from below. To this was now added grunts of greater and greater physical effort and growls of aggression-fuelled assault.

Then there came a new sound. It was the sound of steel on flesh. A roar of anger followed immediately. Karras's enhanced hearing heard blood spatter on

sand.

Extremis Ultra indeed. A fresh rip in the meat of Zeed's left shoulder was pumping blood down his arm. Deep as the wound was, it was only tissue damage. The Raven Guard's enhanced physiology would stop that flow within seconds and a waxy secretion would seal it against further loss. But a wound was a wound. Its significance was greater than the flash of pain it caused. It marked the turning point. While the drones were getting faster and more relentless, Zeed was slowing at last.

Karras reached Kulle, extended a hand, and gripped the Watch sergeant's arm at the elbow.

'How do you see this ending, brother-sergeant?' Karras demanded. 'He has proven himself and more.'

Kulle was surprised at the intrusion, the sudden imposing presence of the red-eyed Death Spectre beside him. Not just any Death Spectre, but a Codicier, senior in his Chapter's Librarius. To a Silver Skull, the will of a Librarian was not something to be ignored.

Kulle looked down at the slate in his hand. The screen showed a graphical representation of the dial he had turned almost all the way to the right. The needle was deep in the red.

Down in the pit, Zeed battered one drone aside with a lateral elbow-strike, kicked another in the chest, and rolled away. When he rose, Karras could see that he was bleeding from a trio of shallow slashes on his chest and back. Nevertheless, his coal-black eyes still blazed with sharp focus. He was enjoying this, revelling in the battle-high.

'Yesss!' he hissed at the drones as they ambled forwards, weapons raised. 'To me, you mindless mannequins! To me!'

His thick blood dripped on the sand between his feet. Karras could smell its ferrous tang mixing with the scent of sweat and hot metal.

Suddenly, the drones froze. Their target lights faded from red to blue. Their arms dropped to their sides, weapons lowered, motors humming to a stop.

Zeed stared at them, momentarily confused, still holding his combat stance.

After a second, he dropped his stance and looked up at the pit's rim. His eyes sought out and found Sergeant Kulle.

'I wasn't done,' said the Raven Guard flatly.

Karras was surprised. He was expecting adrenaline-soaked rage from the long-haired battle-brother, but Zeed seemed to have switched off as easily, and almost as abruptly, as the drones had.

‘Look around you, Ghost,’ Kulle called down, and Karras noted that even the sergeants had started to use the nickname. ‘You have the eye of everyone in the Pankrateon. We all know what you have achieved here today. But you’ve distracted your brothers from their own training long enough. Extremis Ultra.’ He shook his head. ‘Truly, you have made a name for yourself today. Let it stand for now. The others must look to their own training if they are ever to rival you in the pit.’

That drew mutterings from some; typical warrior pride. It was pride only, however, without any real conviction behind it. The others couldn’t deny Kulle’s words. Zeed’s proficiency had held them spellbound. He had dominated three armed attackers of inhuman speed and resilience with nothing but his natural weapons: hands, feet, knees and elbows. That he had done so without power armour or even basic combat-plate was the greatest proof of his skill.

Gradually picking up strength, a wave of applause – right fists beating on chests – started on the far side of the pit from Karras and spread right the way around.

Zeed shook his head, but he was smiling. He moved to the edge of the pit directly below Karras and reached up a hand.

‘A little help, Scholar?’

Kneeling at the edge, Karras reached down, closed his fingers around Zeed’s wrist and stood, hauling him up and over. There they stood, a metre apart, Zeed grinning into Karras’s face. He shrugged and indicated his wounds.

‘Had to let them get a few shots in.’

The smell of his oxygen-rich blood was strong in such close proximity.

‘You fight without peer,’ Karras admitted. ‘But to die in training is to deny the Emperor his due. Our lives are not ours to spend freely.’

‘You sound like a bloody Chaplain.’

‘You would not have stopped until they cut you down, brother. I saw it in your eyes.’

‘How are we to know our limits,’ asked Zeed, ‘if we never fully test them?’

‘What is the point of knowing your limits if they are the last thing you ever know?’ countered the Death Spectre.

The applause bled off, and the others filtered away down the tunnel back into the main hall. There, with ambitions aroused by the spectacle of Zeed’s performance, the Space Marines would train harder than ever. Kulle had known that. He had been counting on it. This was not the first time he had exploited a particularly gifted Space Marine to inspire and motivate others. Each of the

twenty grizzled warriors in the Pankrateon knew that he alone represented the hopes of his Chapter in meeting the old accords. Zeed might be nigh untouchable in hand-to-hand combat, but they were all Space Marines here. Fresh commitment to their training would, at the very least, lessen the margin between themselves and the display they had just witnessed.

Soon the hall echoed anew with clashing and grunting and blood-chilling battle-cries.

In the pit-chamber, Zeed moved around Karras to address Kulle. ‘Thank you for your faith. I know Brother-Sergeant Coteaz had reservations. He left?’

Kulle’s voice was carefully neutral. ‘The Deathwatch has many brothers to train, Raven Guard. It cannot rest all its hopes on you. Brother Coteaz saw that the training of your brothers was being neglected while they spectated here. In future, I will endeavour to follow his example.’

Zeed shook his head. ‘You would have missed quite a show.’

Karras and Kulle both laughed at that.

‘By the nine hells, Raven Guard,’ said the Silver Skull. ‘Arrogance and skill in equal measure. The former will be your downfall one day, I think. As to why I allowed it, well, I’ll not call it faith exactly. When one sets a new standard, it opens the way to greater heights for all. You inspired some and bruised the pride of others. All will train harder as a result.’

With that said, Kulle nodded once to each of them, then strode off, returning to his supervisory duties. As he departed, he called back, ‘Training isn’t over. You’ve another three hours here. Make it count, both of you.’

Karras watched the sergeant disappear down the corridor.

‘Well?’ said Zeed.

‘Well what?’

The Raven Guard gestured at the pit. ‘Train with me. An exchange of techniques. I’ve never seen a Death Spectre fight.’

‘I can’t match your speed.’

Zeed swept his glossy hair back over his left ear.

‘No one can,’ he said and leapt back down to the sandy floor at the bottom. ‘But the gain is in the trying. So let’s see what you’ve got.’

## 13

Varlan followed Aide Primaris Suliman along a bright corridor floored with creamy brown marble. At every ten metres, they passed alcoves housing the shining white busts of various playwrights, artists, actors and writers. There were no political or military figures among them, Varlan noted. No religious icons, either. It attested to what she'd read in the Chiaro dossier. The Lord High Arbitrator was known to spend far more time on the arts than on the practical aspects of planetary rule, no doubt delegating the lion's share of his workload to Suliman and others.

The unimposing little aide led the interrogator towards a set of broad double doors, darkly varnished and detailed with fine carving, watched by two men in the livery of the House Guard. Their uniforms were the purple of the twilight sky over Cholixe, and, though they looked fine and healthy, to Varlan it was clear their role was mostly a mix of decoration and visual deterrent. These were not true fighters like the twins. She got no sense of threat, no subconscious tightening of her gut as she approached them. They had about as much contained violence in them as the alabaster busts lining the hall and if they had ever used those short-barrelled lasguns, it was only on a practice range and not recently, judging by the impeccable condition of the weapons.

Of her own two bodyguards, only the girl Myrda walked behind Varlan. The interrogator had sent Oroga into the city. As she prepared to pass through the double doors at the end of the hall, Varlan thought back to the space port and the moments after her meeting with Asset 16.

She had emerged to find Oroga standing over a body in the darkness.

'Captain Dozois,' he had told her, looking up. 'He was about to follow you inside.'

'He's alive?' Varlan had asked.

'If you want him that way.'

Varlan had considered it. The captain had opted to meddle in her affairs. Not wise. Those that crossed the Inquisition did not live to tell of it. But had Dozois known with whom he was interfering? She doubted that. Had he known her for a servant of the Ordo Xenos, he would never have spent all those weeks trying to bed her. A healthy fear for one's life tended to quell one's carnal appetites.

Actually, that would have brought her some much-wanted peace from the start, but the movement of Ordo assets was not the business of civilians and her master had enemies both within and without that would take great interest in her trip to Chiaro.

No. Varlan would wager the captain's life that he had guessed neither her identity nor her affiliation. He did not need to be permanently silenced so long as he had nothing dangerous to say.

'Serious injuries?' she had asked her aide. 'Did he see you?'

'I don't think so, ma'am,' Oroga had answered. 'I struck him from behind. One blow to the base of the skull. He'll have one hell of a headache, but that's all.'

'Good. Get him back on that shuttle. Dump him in the passenger cabin and shoot him up with one cc of psytoprene[18]. Then get out of there. Let him wonder why his head hurts and he can't remember a damned thing. The headache and the missing time should be enough to keep him out of our way. I want you to go into the city. Once you've seen the cargo into storage, set up a safe-house and get the lay of the land. Myrda and I will stay with this Lord Sannra while it suits me. Contact me at his apartments if there's a problem. Questions?'

'None, ma'am. Leave it to me.'

She had. Oroga had hauled the captain's body back towards the *Macedon's* cargo shuttle under cover of Chiaro's eternal twilight gloom. She and Myrda had ridden with Suliman and his fellows in their armoured cars. Now the double doors were opening and she was about to meet Lord Sannra himself.

Suliman stepped through first, striding into a bright and spacious room with thick burgundy carpeting to announce her.

'Presenting Lady Fara Devanon of House Devanon.'

A tall figure rose from behind a broad desk of dark oak; a broad-shouldered man of about forty. Beneath a waistcoat of House Sannra purple, he wore a white silk shirt with ruffs at collar and neck. He opened his arms and smiled in a gesture of warm welcome. Flanking him on either side were two tall, pale, willowy women – identical twins wearing diamond-studded garments of white gossamer that could barely be called clothes at all. They eyed Varlan critically, then faced each other and sneered, not thinking much of her outfit.

Varlan ignored them beyond the habitual threat assessment.

'Come,' said Nengahem Sannra effusively. 'Enter and be welcome, lady.'

Varlan strode into the room, ignoring Suliman's bow as she passed him.

Sannra came round from the far side of his desk to kiss her hand. He was ten centimetres taller than she and heavily built, but not fat. Whatever his pleasures, he had not fallen into corpulence as so many aristocrats did.

He dismissed his two women with a wave, saying, 'Leave us for now, my swans. I will join you later.'

The women threw Varlan a last contemptuous look as they swept from the room.

'I hear your journey has been a long one, lady,' Sannra continued. 'Sit, please.' He gestured to an ornate, well-padded armchair to Varlan's right, and she accepted with grace. Sannra returned to his own seat on the far side of the desk.

'Sul,' he said, 'have some caff brought in, would you? Are you hungry, lady? Might you appreciate a fruit platter? Something else, perhaps? You need only ask.'

'Very kind, m'lord,' said Varlan, 'but your man Suliman was kind enough to provide a small meal in my room on arrival. It was more than adequate, thank you.'

'Just the caff then, Sul. A great pity you weren't here for dinner, Lady Fara. Barasaur lungs stuffed with chestnuts and glazed with honey. I have a wonderful cook, you know. She's a rare treasure on this Throne-forsaken world.'

'I shall look forward to sampling her work in due course, then.'

'You absolutely must,' said Sannra. 'Now, I've heard so very little about what brings you here, and I'm frankly quite curious. We're very isolated out here. It's a rare honour for me to entertain such a worthy guest, and a cousin of sorts, no less.'

They talked. Varlan said all the things Sannra expected to hear from Lady Fara Devanon. He, in turn, said little that surprised her. He was like many minor nobles given governorships on the edges of the Imperium, desperate for recognition in whatever form it came and equally desperate to prove himself worthy of greater station in life, if only with words. She played to his ego while it served, and guided the conversation into areas that interested her: industrial output, population figures, the religious and political leanings of the people, crime rates and so on. She asked about the Hasmiri and Garrahym both, and remarked on his success in coordinating the operations of two distinct peoples who had little liking for each other. She already knew this was a simple matter of separation, of course – with the two peoples confined to different cities, there hadn't been significant bloodshed between them since before his father's rule – but he took the compliment regardless, and it served her cover.

It was some forty minutes into this first meeting that Varlan sensed Myrda stiffen behind her. She half turned and looked at her bodyguard from the corner of her eye. Myrda had been standing quietly by the door since she and her mistress had entered. She had performed a quick tactical assessment of the room, as she always did, and had indicated *condition yellow* with a quick hand-sign. But now she seemed to be studying it again, slowly and discreetly. She caught Varlan's attention and gave the slightest nod towards one of the grand portraits on the east wall. Varlan glanced over at the painting – a large oil of a surly-looking man in a hunting coat and a long white wig. His left hand, the one in which he held a long wooden pipe, was a steel augmetic.

Lord Sannra noted her gaze. 'My great grandfather,' he said. 'A Navy man for twelve years. Rather stern fellow by all accounts. I never knew him, but the pipe was a gift from the Lord High Commander of Cadia, you know. I still have it.'

'It's a wonderful piece,' said Varlan, making to rise. 'Do you mind?'

'Not at all,' said Sannra, pleased. He pushed his chair back and rose to escort Varlan over to the painting.

For a moment they stood before it in silence, Varlan pretending to appreciate the brushwork. In truth, she was tuning all her senses towards what lay behind the painting.

*Yes, Myrda, you clever girl.*

'It was painted by Morrico of Piscina. Not my favourite of his works, despite the family connection, but my father adored it.'

'And what happened to his hand?'

Before Sannra could answer, Varlan raised her own hand, index finger extended. There was a sharp crack and a burst of light. From the far side of the canvas came a muffled grunt of pain. A body, doubled in agony, ripped through the canvas and collapsed on the floor at Varlan's feet. A silenced autopistol fell to the floor beside it. The trigger was sensitive. As the pistol hit the floor at an angle, it discharged with a muffled cough. The round shattered a lume in the ceiling. Glass showered Lord Sannra's desk.

Sannra cried out and sprang two metres backwards. When no further shots came, he edged forwards, hands on cheeks, keeping Varlan between himself and the body on the carpet. 'What in the name of Carastina is going on here, lady? What did you just do?'

Varlan ignored him. She crouched over the figure on the floor and checked for a pulse. *Faint*. It was a woman, short and slim with black hair tied in a tight bun. She was neither young nor pretty. *Forty or so. Hard worker*. Her white blouse

was stained deep red from the crater Varlan's weapon had left in her chest. She was struggling to breathe.

'A name. Now!' Varlan demanded. 'Who sent you?'

The dying woman's expression changed from one of agony to one of gloating. She bit down hard on something. Blue froth bubbled from between her lips. Varlan shook her. 'No! Warp damn it!' Turning, she barked, 'Myrda, secure this room. No one in or out.'

'Aye, ma'am,' said Myrda, drawing a stun-pistol from beneath her black jacket and turning the lock on the inside of the doors. Outside, the two House Sannra guards started banging and shouting for their employer.

Varlan spoke to Lord Sannra. 'Tell them you are fine. Tell them to be quiet and wait. Order it.'

Sannra gaped. His mouth worked noiselessly for a moment. He looked like a suffocating fish.

'Do it!' snapped Varlan.

Sannra jerked backwards as if slapped, then proceeded to call out to his guards as instructed. They stopped pounding on the doors. When he crouched down beside Varlan again, the lord was pale but his breathing had steadied.

'It's Aga!' he whispered, studying the face of the dead woman. 'One of the senior maids. But she couldn't have known about the crisis tunnel. No one does save Suliman and I.' He stood. 'What was she doing in there? Why the pistol? Did she...? Look here, Lady Fara. What's going on? You just killed one of my maids with that ring of yours. If you're just some noble's daughter here on trade business, then I'm the bloody Lord Marshall of Terra itself! I want answers, now. I'm the governor here!'

'Yes, you are,' hissed Varlan. 'A job you've been doing with your eyes shut, if at all. You don't seem to have noticed the mass disappearances among the Garrahym. You don't seem to have noticed the reports coming in of strange things seen in the mines or on the fringes of your cities.' She gestured at the dead body on the floor. 'You don't seem to notice much at all. One of your own staff was spying on you, perhaps even planning to kill you this day.' *Or me*, she thought, *which is the more likely*. 'How many more might be doing the same, Arbitrator? How safe do you think you are? We both know the guards at your doors are more for show than anything else. Even they might be traitors awaiting an opportune moment.'

Sannra made a scoffing sound, but there was fresh fear in his eyes. It soon gave way to anger. 'You can't come in here and say such things. You can't just

shoot the place up like this. I say again, just who the devil are you?’

Time to play her cards, Varlan knew. If she was to get his full cooperation, she had best reveal herself now. Her master would make sure the loose ends were tied up later.

Committed, she reached two fingers down into her bodice and drew a circular pendant from her cleavage. The setting was of intricately worked silver, in the centre of which sat a ruby cut into a perfect disk. The gem was both a button and a lens, and Varlan pressed it, then sat the pendant in the palm of her hand. Above it, a hololithic image of a skull appeared and began to rotate. In the centre of the skull’s forehead was a rune: the Inquisitorial ‘I’ crossed with three short bars, each representing one of the great ordos. After a few seconds the skull vanished to be replaced by the rotating image of a scroll on which were inscribed Varlan’s credentials in tiny Gothic runes.

‘My name is Shianna Varlan,’ she told the astonished aristocrat. ‘Interrogator class 3, Ordo Xenos, agent of His Imperial Majesty’s Holy Orders of the Inquisition. My word is law, Nengahem Sannra. From the moment I set foot on your world, your authority was superseded. Chiaro faces a crisis it is not equipped to deal with. That is why I have been sent. I have come to aid you. If I can, I will save you.

‘But you will do as I command, or you will die.’

Tencycles came and went. Times in the kill-block improved. Previous bests were beaten, then beaten again. Accuracy rates with the new weapons and ammunition types went up. Proficiency in race-specific close quarters combat methods rose steadily. And still the Space Marines trained without the power armour to which they had so long been accustomed. At first, eschewing armour throughout the first half of Deathwatch training had seemed a strange, even ill-considered approach to Karras and the others. Ceramite plate and boltgun were badges of honour, the entitlement of those tested to the brink of death – in Karras’s case, beyond even that. They were entitlements not easily put aside. But now, some two hundred cycles into the programme, with their performance levels beyond anything the sequestered Space Marines had previously known, the logic behind it could not be faulted.

Dependence could be deadlier than the most lethal of foes.

If a Space Marine of long years’ experience could no longer wage war without the iconic armour and weaponry that were his hard-earned right, was he not less than the aspiring Scout he had once been? How could such a one justify his place among the legendary Adeptus Astartes? It was not one’s power armour or weapons that made one a Space Marine. It was the man inside – the body, the mind, the spirit, all forged in a training and augmentation regimen that killed far more than it successfully produced. Strip away all the tools of his lethal trade and you changed nothing; a Space Marine was still a Space Marine.

*Forged on Occludus, and re-forged here on Damaroth. I am more than I was. And yet, without my powers, how could I not feel so much less?*

Only another Librarian could truly understand. A power so great, so multifaceted; a gift of blood, of complicated and ancient lineage – it became part of the soul, woven into the very fabric of the self. When mankind was young, still numbering less than a trillion, people had doubted the evidence before them, doubted that a few could see paths into the future or start a fire with but a thought. The confluence of genetic factors that allowed the birth of the witchblooded was still all too rare. But humans had proliferated, had spread across the stars, the race exploding and expanding. And with the growth of their number came a burgeoning of that evidence. Now, without the eldritch abilities

of astropaths and Navigators, without the empyrean fire and fury of sanctioned battlefield psykers, the Imperium would shatter and fragment, and the jaws of the xenos threat would snap shut over the human race forever.

*Call us what they will, be it witchkin, witchblood, blackfate or any other name; it is we who hold this Imperium together, even as fools shrink from us and make the warding sign over their hearts when we pass.*

He had tried to understand the fear and contempt others bore towards his kind, but they had never known the invigorating sense of freedom and strength his power gave him. To him it seemed that the lives of the ungifted were lived blind. They missed so much that was all around them. They would never see the coruscating aura that flickered and danced like living flame around ancient artefacts that had belonged to heroes or saints. They would never know the joys of watching an enemy's soul dissipate into the ether after being wrenched from its physical body by a killing blow.

It was only natural that one came to rely on so great a gift – as natural as relying on one's eyes to see and one's ears to hear. To Karras, fighting without his gift was like fighting without one of those senses. Suppressing it by choice was like disabling one's own arm before leaping into battle. Senseless.

Yet all Librarians knew the sword was double-edged. He thought back a hundred years and heard his khadit's voice, deep and clear:

‘There are enemies in the vastness of space to whom your gift is as nothing. Never forget that. Some can suppress it entirely, even turn it against you. Faced with such foes, your salvation lies in bolt and blade, and in those beside whom you fight. Unleash your power with due caution, for it carries a price and, as with all things, excess is the path to one's undoing.’

It was downtime, the end of another tencycle, as Karras recalled these words. Second Litany had been said, as it always was at the end of a cycle. Ninety minutes remained before the beginning of the next, but Karras had opted not to sleep. Nor had he gone to the Refectorum. Instead, he had come to one of the central keep's many spires seeking silence and solitude. Here he sat, on a deep stone sill before an armourglass window, knees drawn up to his broad chest, looking out at a strange blue snowfall. It was dark and silent up here in the tower heights, and icy cold, but that didn't bother a Space Marine. Karras's breath misted in the air in front of him.

The moon of Damaroth was shrouded from view by thick cloud, but the glow from the fat flakes of eerie blue snow cast a chill light on the ancient stone floor behind him as they drifted against the glass.

So much insecurity still. So much doubt. He should have adjusted fully by now. Others had. He knew he was holding himself back. Still, he couldn't feel entirely angry at himself. So many things seemed to hover just beyond the edge of his awareness, just out of mental reach. Important things. Things he would have perceived if only his power hadn't been locked away. In frustration, he had almost considered tearing out the accursed implant, and not just once since the day of his run-in with the arrogant Ultramarine.

*Prophet, indeed!*

Karras had reached back over his head, groping blindly for the protruding edge of the metal casing where the warp field suppressor sat like a cold, steel spider on his upper spine, level with his shoulder blades. His fingers had brushed it, but there was no purchase to be gained on its surface. It had been sunk deep into flesh. Besides, he knew he couldn't really pull it out. He believed Lochainé. The implant's artificial ganglia had penetrated his spinal cord and linked themselves to his own. He wasn't about to risk permanent self-paralysis.

*I must bear it for now. The time will come.*

He thought of the Megir then, of the terrible burden the First Spectre carried, of all he endured for the Chapter and the Imperium itself, suffering in faith and hope, his life-force being burned up far faster than it ought to be, all in the name of the Great Resurrection which Corcaedus had foretold. Shame hit Karras like a wave and he resolved to do better, but a darkness clung to his thoughts. The knowledge that Athio Cordatus would one day take the First Spectre's place twisted Karras's stomach. He didn't think he could stand to see his khadit's life-force bled away by that damnable throne. To know the Shariax was killing the First Spectre even now was almost too much to bear. He sought distraction – something, anything to bring him back to the here and now.

Outside, the snow was getting deeper, the flakes were getting fatter. So strange, that blizzard of gently pulsing blue light. So eerie, the blanket it lay upon the surface of the vast artificial ring. What manner of beings had made this inexplicable place? Were they still out there somewhere – a xenos threat to be purged in blood and fire?

Through the old stone archway on the right, Karras heard the unmistakable beat of a battle-brother's footsteps on the long stone stairwell. The sound echoed up to him from far below. The approaching Space Marine still had long minutes of ascent before he would arrive here, but the sound of those footfalls had already broken Karras's peace.

*Perhaps that's just as well,* he thought.

He knew by now the identity of the one who approached. The climber's height and weight were written in the sounds of his steps, along with much else besides.

It was Lochaine, Chief Librarian of Damaroth. Dimly, a part of Karras sensed his power, despite the fact that the greater part of his own was sealed from him.

When the footsteps ended, Karras turned to see the huge Storm Warden standing in the arched stone doorway, his face cast in faint blue tones from the snow outside.

'I intrude on you,' said Lochaine.

'Not without welcome,' replied Karras; a polite formality, if not entirely honest.

Lochaine allowed himself a smile and entered the room unhurriedly. He moved to the large recessed sill on which Karras sat and gazed outside.

'Haunting in a way, isn't it?' he said of the glowing snow. 'The Mechanicus remain at a loss to explain it. Samples dissipate too quickly for any proper study.'

'The universe will have its secrets,' said Karras.

Lochaine frowned. 'We trust you as much as any, Death Spectre. If you do not understand by now the need for—'

'I understand well enough. Forgive me. It is I who am the cause of my own dissatisfaction. I feel I should have adapted fully by now. I train to my limits and beyond, and I follow the strictures. I know only too well what I and my Chapter gain by my presence here. But still...'

*The implant. The lack of trust. The need to set the core of one's very identity aside.*

Lochaine leaned against the opposite side of the stone window frame and glanced out at the pulsing snow. He wore a tunic of rough black cloth belted with a thick silver chain. From the chain hung a small censer, a silver ball with aquila-shaped apertures. Aromatic smoke curled up and around him, clinging to him like the tendrils of some ghostly oceanic creature.

'You have been resisting the hypno-induction process, brother,' said Lochaine. 'More so than most. We've seen it before, of course, but it brings only misery and difficulty. You must let go. We do not ask that you put your Chapter aside. Do we not honour all who stand by the Old Accords? You do no one any favours, least of all yourself. The honour of the Death Spectres will be better served by dropping your barriers. Embrace the Watch as it waits to embrace you. There is great glory to be earned. Do most of the veterans who return not make the rank of captain in time? And how many of those went on to become Chapter

Masters? The number might surprise you.'

Karras shivered at that.

*Become the master of his Chapter and slowly petrify on the cold seat of the Shariax? Better a death in battle. Better anything but that.*

And there it was; the reason he resisted so hard.

*I fight out of loyalty to the Megir and to the Order, but it is more than that. I fight out of guilt. I know how he suffers on our behalf.*

If Lochaine detected his sudden chill, he chose to let it go unmentioned.

*And yet, Karras thought, it was the Megir and the Menrahir[19] who put me forward for Deathwatch service. They would not do so simply to honour me. There is greater purpose to all they do. Emperor, grant me the faith I need to serve that purpose without question. Therein lies my true duty.*

Karras met the eyes of the Deathwatch Librarian.

'Have I been a fool, brother? Is that how you see me?'

Lochaine smiled.

'If only you knew how alike we were, Lyandro. When I was in your place, the Chief Librarian of the Watch at that time almost authorised a mind-wipe, such was my resistance. The Watch Commander, too, thought me beyond all hope of full induction. He judged my recruitment a mistake, but my brothers in the Watch Librarius would not relent. Loyalty is a fine quality, Lyandro, and there is no such thing as *too much*. But how one's loyalties are served and how they are best placed is a thing that needs great consideration.

'Stop fighting it. Let yourself be the warrior this Imperium needs. Service to the Watch does not last forever. It is only temporary.'

'It does not seem so temporary for you,' Karras countered.

Lochaine nodded. 'Many fear permanent secondment at first, eager to return to their brothers, especially before the hypno-induction takes root fully. The Watch makes higher demands of some than of others. But I came to terms with that long ago. The honour of the Storm Wardens is served better by my continued presence here. My name will be writ large in the Halls of Honour when I am gone. Many of my kills already grace the chambers of the Great Ossuary. I am as proud to be Deathwatch as I am to be a Storm Warden. I have made a difference. Brothers survived to return to their Chapters with honour because I stood beside them. I would serve an eternity for that alone. We are the line between life and death to our kill-teams, Lyandro. We live forever in the memories of those we lead. I no longer see things as I once did. Nor shall you.'

Karras gazed out beyond the cold armourglass pane.

‘Hypno-induction changes the very way we think. I do not wish to lose my *self*.’

‘Nothing is lost, only better shaped to fit needs, as it was when you rose from neophyte to battle-brother. Or would you return to Occludus in disgrace, your mind wiped of all you have seen and learned here? How would that serve the honour of those you love?’

Karras nodded thoughtfully. He realised he would rather die than allow such events to unfold. That was no idle assertion. It was sincere. He had crossed a bridge, and the weight on his soul seemed to rise, to lift away and dissipate like disturbed crows scattering into a winter sky.

Lochaine saw it on his face, that change, like sunlight breaking through clouds.

‘I will be all the Deathwatch asks,’ said Karras, resolute. ‘I will honour the accords. You have my word.’

Lochaine didn’t have to read the Death Spectre’s aura to believe it.

‘I am glad we have reached this point, brother. In truth, we could wait no longer. Things are about to change, for you and for all who have answered the call. Preparatory training is drawing to an end. In seven more cycles, you will be called to take Second Oath. Hypno-induction must be completed before then because, after Second Oath, you will be Deathwatch, and from that moment until the day you are released from service, it is to the Deathwatch that first honour must be served.’

Karras bowed, ready at last, seeing the need.

‘There is another important change you should know about,’ continued Lochaine. ‘Kill-team allocations have been finalised. After Second Oath, they will be announced. You will begin training exclusively with your kill-team, and unit cohesion will be key.’

That, at least, was welcome news. The quirks and moods of just four or five battle-brothers would be far more manageable than dealing with those of almost a hundred.

Lochaine glanced out the window again, his face revealed in profile to Karras as he added, ‘You’ll return to training in power armour, too, and with a full loadout. Second Oath gives you the right to don the black at last. The Watch sigil will grace your shoulder. Be proud to wear it. So few earn that right. Fewer still wear it for long.’ He turned his eyes back to Karras. ‘We do our best to recover those that fall and send their remains back to their Chapter worlds. Would that the number were higher.’

‘Brother Stephanus,’ replied Karras. ‘It meant a lot to his company that they were able to inter him in the sacred catacombs.’

‘He died well,’ said Lochaine. ‘As did the Death Spectres who served the Watch before him. May we all meet such a worthy end when the time comes.’

‘I fear not death,’ said Karras resolutely.

‘For you embody it in His Name. It is a fine motto. The name of the Death Spectres is less renowned than some, but know that it is well honoured here, despite your misgivings. I would not have sought you out otherwise. We expect great things from you, Lyandro Karras, despite the special challenges you will most certainly face.’

Lochaine pushed himself from the wall then and strode to the archway leading to the stairs.

‘What does that mean, brother?’ Karras asked the Storm Warden’s broad back. ‘Special challenges?’

‘Just a few more tencycles, Death Spectre,’ said Lochaine as he began his long descent. ‘We shall speak again after Second Oath.’

## 15

The flashlights of the enforcers cast broad beams through the glittering, frost-filled air. Neither Varlan nor her trusty aides needed much light themselves – even the darkest shadows surrendered detail to their top-of-the-line augmetics – but the enforcer squads Lord Sannra had ordered to escort her would have been as blind as earthworms down here without their gear. It was a flustered Sannra, too, who had ordered the railways cleared so that several Viper LAVs[20] could push deep into the mines unhindered, carrying Varlan and her escort. And here they were at last, in the very hall where Ordimas had witnessed the ceremony of the strange and seedy cult.

No bodies, no lit lamps, no sign that anyone had been here recently save recent ash in the wall sconces and braziers, and a profusion of tracks on the icy stone floor. *Yes. Lots of foot traffic.* Oroga was crouched over, studying it while Myrda stood watching Varlan's back, her awareness electrically charged to every sound around them. Both the twins were on *code orange*, ready to respond to any threat.

Oroga looked up and nodded at Varlan.

*The tracks are recent, then. They fit Ordimas's experience exactly.*

Varlan's gaze moved to the black mouth of the tunnel that led away from the rear of the hall's elevated stage. It was along that tunnel her answers lay.

Looking at the stage, she shuddered, remembering all too sharply the sights she'd seen through Asset 16's opticom.

*Here. It all happened right here.*

Footsteps sounded behind her, and Varlan turned to find Lieutenant Borges approaching, breath misting from the muzzle filters of his rebreather. He stopped a few steps in front of Myrda, who had automatically positioned herself to block his approach. 'You were right, ma'am,' he said, speaking past the deceptively slim bodyguard, voice muffled by his apparatus. 'Recent activity. Too many tracks to make head or tail of.'

Varlan removed her own rebreather to reply. She needn't have, but the strap was pulling painfully at her hair and she wanted to adjust it. The next breath was icy sharp in her lungs, but not intolerable. The powered thermasuit the enforcers had lent her kept her body at a steady temperature, but that too bothered her. It

felt close and hot, even in the airy, ice-rimed hall. The control module was belted at her lower back. In a moment, she decided, she would ask Myrda to adjust it.

‘I did not expect to find anyone here, lieutenant, but you will take the matter more seriously now, I presume.’

The officer stiffened. ‘I assure you, ma’am, I never take my duties any less than that. As I told you, this section of the Underworks has been abandoned for centuries. It was listed as stripped and locked down. Only a mine administrator or a tech-priest could have reopened it.’

‘Then a mine administrator or a tech-priest is clearly part of the insurgency.’

‘Insurgency? Come now, ma’am. Surely this is just a group of religious nuts who’ve breathed in a little too much soledite dust.’

‘How many people have been reported missing in the last year, lieutenant? How many of those resurfaced soon after. How many children were born in Cholixe? More or less than in preceding years? How much equipment and provision went mysteriously unaccounted for? You see accidents, population increase and theft as all quite separate. I tell you now that they are not. The Civitas here on Chiaro have been caught sleeping. You are damned lucky I arrived when I did. Who can say how close the enemy’s knife was to your own throat?’

The lieutenant’s brow furrowed, but he bit back whatever reply was forming on his lips. Instead, he asked tersely, ‘And what would the inquisitor have us do now?’

‘I have told you already that I am an interrogator. In terms of relative authority to your own, it hardly matters, but I’ll ask you to stop making the error.’

Borges was flexing his fists now. He was not a man used to being commanded. Nor was he used to being chastised. Who was this bloody woman to show up here and start running the show? And that aristo-fool, Sannra. Since when did he mess in Civitas matters? Better the man lock himself away with his addictions. Lord High Arbitrator in name only, that one. It was the Administratum men and the tech-priests that kept this place running. They left the Civitas to their business, and rightly so. This woman, though...

‘My apologies, interrogator,’ he offered insincerely. ‘What would you have us do now?’

Varlan noted the lack of apology in the man’s tone, but it hardly mattered. ‘The tunnel at the back,’ she told him, pointing. ‘If we’re to know more, we’ll have to go deeper.’

‘It means leaving guards with the vehicles,’ replied Borges. ‘I’ll not have those

Vipers fall into the hands of this supposed cult.’

‘I leave force disposition to you, lieutenant, but let us move quickly. We’re not here to sight-see.’

Borges grunted and turned away. When he was out of earshot, Myrda leaned in and spoke to her principal. ‘Don’t think he likes you much, ma’am.’

‘I expect not, Myrda. These people have had it their own way for far too long. That’s the problem with fringe worlds. Too much freedom, not enough scrutiny. Come, let’s mount the platform.’

She called Oroga over and addressed the twins together. ‘We’re going deeper. Stay sharp. Asset 16 never went beyond this point. From here, we break new ground. I want any observations you care to make. Anything at all, clear?’

‘Clear, ma’am,’ said both in unison.

Lieutenant Borges had posted guards on the LAVs by now and had organised his platoon-strength force to move out – forty men minus the guards he’d posted, all in las-proof plate with heavy riot-guns locked and loaded. With a barked command, they all set off, two of Borges’s best scouts up front, followed by a six-man fire-team. Behind the fire-team, Varlan and her aides walked with Borges and his second, a big sergeant called Caradine. Behind them came the rest of the force, all in combat helmets and carapace armour. The lieutenant was the only one dressed any differently. Eschewing a helmet, he had opted for a black beret with a golden Civitas crest on the front, a privilege of his rank, but one liable to get him killed if he wasn’t careful, Varlan thought. Some of the men muttered from beneath their integrated rebreathers about being sent down into the freezing dark on *a bloody ghost hunt*. Others hushed them, glad of any change to the routine of daily duty on the city streets.

Varlan registered all this with growing irritation. A good officer would have stamped it out. Even better, a good commissar.

Up ahead, the torchlight of the scouts played across curving tunnel walls. The rock had been plastered over, giving everything a smooth surface that glittered with ice crystals. In the ceiling, some two-and-a-half metres above them, there were regular lume-globe fixtures, but there was no power to light them. Some had been broken, but how recently? Fragments of transparent plastek lay on the tunnel floor. They could have been there a day, a year, a century.

‘Halt,’ hissed one of the scouts from up ahead.

Varlan looked up the tunnel and saw the fire-team in front of her squat down suddenly. The scout who had spoken was pointing something out to his companion. His left hand was raised in a fist to stop everyone behind him.

‘Signs of a struggle here,’ he said at last over the vox-net. ‘Looks recent. Days, maybe a week. Difficult to tell with everything getting frozen so fast. Scuffs on the wall. Boots, fingers. There’s a little blood on the left side and on the floor.’

‘Anything else?’ asked Borges.

The scouts were silent for a few more moments. ‘Nothing, sir. Proceeding.’

The platoon continued down the tunnel. They passed several broad chambers – junctions, really – where decisions had to be made. Tracks in the frost led off in every direction. Myrda and Oroga worked with the scouts where there was any doubt. Together, they managed to keep the party on the path most recently used.

‘Your people don’t need any light,’ Borges said to Varlan as they strode through the gloom together. It was an observation, not a question. He had been watching how surely and effortlessly they moved in the gloom. The tunnel currently being traversed was, unlike most so far, wide enough to accommodate two or three people walking abreast. It was five minutes into this particular tunnel that he had decided to break silence with her. Perhaps, she thought, he was coming to terms with her authority now. Perhaps he regretted his earlier manner. *Rightly so.*

‘A little,’ she told him, ‘but not much.’ She did not tell him that she, too, boasted low-light vision capability, though hers, unlike the night-vision of the twins, was monocular, provided as it was by her opticom.

‘Have they much experience with this sort of thing?’

‘This sort of thing?’

‘I... I’m not sure what to call it, ma’am. You’ve spoken of a cult down here. And you’re not mistaken about disappearances, but that’s always been a hazard of mining on Chiaro. People get lost. There are cave-ins, machinery accidents, all sorts. There are dangerous creatures down here, too. Nightside has its indigenous life. The miners run into them from time to time: tunnel-jellies, volpiad swarms, kinefrachs, all dangerous in their own way. There haven’t been any sudden spikes in missing persons. Those reported seem to turn up alive after a few days. I can’t speak on the subject of births, mind, but I don’t see how that would relate to a cult way down here in the deep tunnels. What the heck would they eat down here? How would they survive? You think they’re cannibals?’

Varlan didn’t answer that. Speculation was useless right now, and what she did know was not for a mere lieutenant’s ears. Instead, she answered his earlier question. ‘My people have the highest level of training and the very best military grade augs, lieutenant. Experienced? Let me say this: were I forced to choose between them and an entire company of Imperial Guard, I should still choose the

twins. That's not lip-service, I assure you.'

Borges went silent for a while. Varlan could guess what he was thinking:

*Who are these bloody people and what are they doing on my planet?*

Local law-enforcement were always the same. An inflated sense of importance. They'd know little of the Inquisition or its work. Borges would have checked the Civitas archives and found that no inquisitor had ever set foot on Chiaro before. At least, none that had ever been recorded in the archives to which *he* had access. All he'd know is that Varlan's authority superseded even Lord Sannra's. Exactly how or why would be bothering the breeches off him right now. She saw him studying Myrda and Oroga.

'I should like to see them in action,' the officer said at last.

'Better for all concerned, lieutenant, that you never get the chance.'

Myrda and Oroga overheard. Not difficult. Their hearing was superb. Varlan thought she saw them throw each other a glance. She grinned beneath her rebreather. They had every right to a little shared pride. She had told the Civitas officer no lie when she had said she would choose them over an entire company of Guard. They had proven themselves equal to her expectations in every regard during the three years she had been their principal.

The men in front of her suddenly halted again. Borges's hand flew to the large autopistol at his hip. 'What is it?' he hissed through his throat-vox. 'Gormund, report.'

Varlan fingered the grip of the ornate plasma pistol holstered on her right thigh. On her left, her golden sabre hung, a deadly vibrablade so valuable and steeped in old glory she often felt unworthy of it. His Lordship had made a gift of it, but a gift that came with a warning and a price.

*Let it remind you to always give your best, he had told her. Because any less will not be tolerated. The Ordo has no place for second-raters, Shianna.*

Varlan had made living up to the gift her personal mission.

'End of the tunnel, sir,' one of the scouts voxed back quietly.

Varlan noted how stealthy the enforcers had suddenly become. Good vox discipline, too.

*Not as sloppy as I thought, Varlan admitted to herself. Good.*

'What can you see?' Borges asked his scouts.

'A cavern or a hall, sir. It's massive. Dome-shaped, by the looks of it. Our flashlights aren't quite reaching the far wall.'

'Give me an estimate,' Varlan interrupted.

The two scouts conferred in whispers for a moment.

‘Six hundred metres in diameter, we reckon, ma’am. Maybe two hundred metres to the ceiling. Looks like it might be an old shift-station.’

Varlan turned to Borges. ‘A shift-station?’

Borges shrugged. ‘Back before the train systems were properly installed, work-crews would come into the mines for months, even years, at a time. The tech-priests set up shift-stations for them – a sort of small town for them to live in while they worked down here. They were mostly a mix of habitation, maintenance and ore-processing facilities. After the transport systems were completed, they just started shipping workers in and out for each shift. There’s not much call for such places any more.’

‘But there *are* others?’

‘Aye, a few. Well spread out. I don’t see how anyone could live in them, though. No power to them now. The tech-priests used to use geothermal transfer sinks to power them, but when the shift-stations were abandoned, they removed the fusion cells. Honestly, interrogator, if we’re looking for people down here, it can’t be many, and they’re living on a knife-edge. The cold would surely kill them if starvation didn’t. None of this makes any sense.’

Varlan didn’t contradict him, but she knew better. They weren’t looking for *people* as Borges thought of them. Normal men and women couldn’t run any kind of rebellion from down here. No, there was nothing normal about the cult that Ordimas Arujo had uncovered.

‘What do you think, Caradine?’ Borges asked his second-in-command.

Caradine’s voice was gruff. It had a hoarse whispering quality to it, the result of having had his throat cut during a skirmish outside a Rockhead bar.

‘Sweep-and-clear, sir,’ he said. ‘Jus’ like it were a sector purge topside. Safest way forward, I reckon.’

Borges nodded, then remembered himself and looked to Varlan for confirmation.

‘Do it,’ said the interrogator.

Borges addressed his force over the vox. ‘Right, gentlemen. You know the drill. I want a good, swift sweep-and-clear of the entire chamber. Safeties on unless we have contact. Six-metre spacing. Watch your corners and your angles. A-Squad, take left. B- and C-Squads on centre. D, take right. You report anything to me at once, and I mean anything. We don’t know what we’re looking at down here, so I want eyes sharp. Squad leaders?’

The four squad leaders, all corporals, voxed back their acknowledgement, and the party moved out of the tunnel mouth and into the gaping space of the dark,

silent dome.

Varlan could feel the tension on the biting air. The men didn't talk. Some were afraid. They were used to breaking up wage-riots and drunken brawls. Here in the inky blackness, their imaginations began to work on them, pricking their minds with icy needles of fear.

Bars of torchlight swung to and fro as the men marched steadily forwards. The light picked out scores of squat prefab structures, long abandoned and rimed in ice. Their metal walls shimmered as if encrusted with a billion tiny gems. Here and there, doors hung open like the slack mouths of long dead men. Anxious enforcers peeked into these, sweeping flashlights and gun muzzles from corner to corner, satisfying themselves perhaps a little too quickly that they were unoccupied.

Varlan and the twins walked between and a little behind Squads B and C, accompanied by a tense, tight-lipped Borges and Sergeant Caradine. She watched the men in front as they entered and exited each structure, always in twos. There were several structures to which no easy entry could be gained. The doors and shutters were frozen solidly in place. These, the men swiftly abandoned and moved on, asserting with good reason that they had not been in recent use.

'What's this building?' Varlan asked Borges, gazing up at the tallest structure, a gargantuan monolith of plasteel plate, frosted concrete and broad metal pipes.

'This will be the main power node, ma'am.'

'I want it checked, thoroughly, lieutenant. And these look like storehouses and silos on either side. I want them checked out, too.'

'We can do a cursory sweep, ma'am, but anything else will take bloody hours. You can see for yourself that no one has been in or out of them. Not with those doors frozen solid. We've been down here half a day as it is, and my men are getting tired and hungry, not to mention bloody cold despite the thermasuits. Now, we're with you, have no doubt of that. But we're just thirty-odd men, and I think it's time my lads had a break. We'll finish the first sweep, set up a perimeter, and give them a bit of down-time before we crack open the bigger structures and go room-to-room. What do you say?'

Varlan was about to lash him with an angry reply when someone called out from the darkness, the voice clear and penetrating and chilling beyond even the icy air.

'It sounds like an excellent idea, lieutenant, but I wouldn't worry about that perimeter. It seems you've found what you were looking for. Or rather, it has

found you. Welcome, Interrogator Varlan. May I call you Shianna? We've been so looking forward to your arrival. Word travels fast on Chiaro.'

The sudden hard glare of powerful spotlights stabbed at Varlan's organic eye. Her augmented eye whirred softly, racing to compensate. She threw a hand up, squinting against the brief pain. The speaker gave a cold, clear laugh.

'And now we have you. The Master will be pleased.'

## 16

Karras sat in the Refectorium, halfway through his gruel, part of his mind occupied by the age-browned pages of the old tome in front of him, the other part turning over the events of the last exercise.

For seven hours, he and nine others had endured the caustic air, strange smells and harsh light inside one of the great pavilions. Eighty kilometres long on a side, the glittering pavilions were no mere botanical gardens, though many of them did contain vast forests of alien vegetation. Instead, each was a kind of reserve with its own special atmosphere and cogitator-controlled gravity, home to a variety of deadly alien organisms that had been brought to Damaroth and, in some cases, bred here.

Incredibly, the tencycle had involved running sniper operations against an entire four hundred-member tribe of imprisoned kroot.

The aliens were armed with the weapons favoured by their kind – powerful, long-barrelled rifles and vicious curving blades. They were well organised, highly skilled, supreme hunters with a long tradition of war. Karras couldn't guess how long they had been at Damaroth, but he suspected most had been born here, raised knowing the reserve as home. They were fiercely territorial. They had established a village in the centre of the pavilion encircled by an abatis made from the trunks of the trees that had stood around it. There was no hope of them ever breaking out, of course. Deadly automated defence systems were in place at every possible exit. The kroot had learned long ago that getting too close to the pavilion's inner walls was a waste of one's life.

They had learned the Gothic tongue of the Imperium, and the vox-speakers fitted throughout the reserve warned them of their intruders and told them they were being hunted. This stirred them into forming furious and excited hunting parties of their own. Karras and the others had to locate, identify and eliminate their pre-assigned targets without becoming prey themselves.

Had he not been burdened with the suppression implant, Karras could have employed his gifts to guide him, cloak him, divert the kroot hunting parties, even to eliminate his target. But all he'd had was a set of camouflaged combat fatigues, a bolter with a single magazine and a standard combat blade.

And knowledge.

Using all he had learned so far at the Watch fortress, he was able to avoid detection, get a good line-of-sight on his mark, and end another alien life.

The kill-shot had snapped that beaked head backwards, spraying the dirt with foul purplish blood.

In truth, his own performance during the exercise was not what occupied Karras as he numbly spooned cold nutriment into his mouth. It was the Ultramarine's performance that held his thoughts. Solarion had been in the same training group once again – the first time since their now infamous confrontation. Today, he had shown himself to be in a different class entirely. Even the Watch sergeant in command of the exercise – one Brother Bastide of the Sable Swords, a combat-proven hard-reconnaissance specialist himself – watched with thin-lipped disbelief as Solarion struck targets that ought to have been well out of range. That he had done so using the fin-stabilised, gas-propelled *Stalker* stealth rounds – something he had never used before, and whose density, balance and aerodynamic qualities he was thus unused to – proved him beyond a mere *natural*. He was, at least in terms of his specialisation, a legitimate prodigy.

Karras wished his respect for the Ultramarine could be pure and untainted, but he was certain it would always be overshadowed by what had passed between them. Perhaps, with the taking of Second Oath, it would no longer matter. They would soon be assigned to kill-teams. Throne willing, the day would soon come after which he'd never see the Ultramarine again. Unless...

He frowned and consciously attempted to centre himself, pushing bitter thoughts from his mind. He focused on the exercise itself and on the lessons it had reinforced, things he had made a habit over countless hard hours spent in the kill-blocks.

*Shape, shine, shadow and silhouette. The four 'S's. All must be eliminated lest one give one's position away.*

Suddenly, he became aware of a change in the atmosphere around him. He looked up from his bowl. The Refectorium had gone silent. Some of the battle-brothers had turned where they sat, facing the entrance to Karras's right. There was a tension in the air waiting to break. Karras followed their gaze and saw a tall, broad Space Marine in a tunic of bright red standing in the west archway surveying the room. About his waist was a belt of gold hexagons, each inscribed with hexagrammic glyphs. On forearm and shin, he wore bracers and greaves, also of gold, engraved with richly detailed honour markings. He looked formidable, perhaps a Chapter champion, but of which Chapter?

It was then that Karras noted the horned skull tattoo on the newcomer's neck, a sigil he had seen in books and scrolls only. Never in person. But here it was now, marking its bearer as a Space Marine of the Exorcists.

The warrior finished his survey and marched stiffly into the Refectorium accompanied by Watch Captain Oro, dwarfing everyone present in his armour of Deathwatch black. As they drew level with Karras, who had lowered his spoon and placed it on the table, the Exorcist stopped and turned. He looked down his nose at Karras and stood there, staring silently, assessing for a long moment.

Karras, discomfited by something other than the stare, rose to his feet and addressed Captain Oro.

'Well met, Watch captain.'

'Lyandro Karras,' said the captain, 'This is Darrion Rauth—'

'Of the Exorcists,' Karras finished for him.

The Space Marine in red neither smiled, nor extended his hand. He simply stared. Karras had never seen such hollow, lifeless eyes on a living being – small, pale green eyes without any spark, sunk in dark pits under a low brow. His nose was flat and slightly skewed to the right, as if broken and then either badly reset or ignored completely. The most notable thing about that nose, however, was the deep scar across the bridge. It extended out over the right cheek and down to the jaw line. It was far from the only scar on that weathered, craggy face. Service studs told of long decades spent in battle. The Exorcist's short hair was a dark brownish red streaked with grey, brushed forwards, framing his face.

His eyes fell to the book on the table in front of Karras.

'Ordell's *Advancement of Imperial Man*,' he said. His voice was low and harsh, like grinding rocks. 'Extreme hardship is the root of all strength,' he quoted.

'And self-love is the surest path to one's destruction,' Karras finished, recalling the opening lines of chapter fifty-nine.

Silence hung for a time, broken only when an impatient Captain Oro cleared his throat. The Exorcist paid the captain's hint little attention. He seemed on the verge of saying something important, but he never quite got to it. Instead, he told Karras simply, 'Countless are the paths to destruction, Death Spectre. In the end, we all choose one.'

'Or one chooses us,' Karras returned, but he was thinking, *This one knows my Chapter, though I wear no visible sigil. Someone has spoken to him of me. Did Oro bring him through the Refectorium knowing I was here? Why?*

Something about the encounter made him believe it was no random event.

Rauth spoke once more only. 'I don't believe that. One's doom lies in the choices one makes. There are no excuses.'

To Karras it sounded accusatory, but that made no sense. How could it? As Darrion Rauth and Watch Captain Oro marched from the hall, followed by the eyes of muttering Space Marines on either side, Karras decided the entire encounter had been bewildering.

No. More than bewildering. It had been unsettling in the extreme, for what the others had failed to notice about Darrion Rauth, Karras had noted the moment he had laid eyes on him, despite the suppression of his extra senses. He had thought himself mistaken at first. Fatigued, perhaps. Definitely confused.

But he knew himself better than that.

The absence of any possible explanation changed nothing.

The Exorcist appeared to have no soul.

‘Contact,’ someone bellowed from an avenue on the right.

‘Hostiles! All sides!’ yelled another desperately.

‘The rooftops,’ shouted Oroga over the sudden eruption of gunfire all around. He was already moving to put himself in front of Varlan. Myrda, too, had immediately moved to shield the interrogator from fire. From behind, she grabbed her principal by the shoulders and hauled her into the cover of the nearest corner.

‘Enemy strength,’ Varlan hissed. ‘Numbers. How many?’

Oroga shook his head. ‘Difficult to say, ma’am, but at least double our own. They knew we were coming.’

On the vox-net, enforcers strung out across the domed space were shouting, desperately trying to coordinate some kind of counter-attack. But between the shouts, screams rang out. The attackers poured fire down on them from the rooftops and from the tunnel mouths on the far side of the shift-station.

Oroga ducked out from behind a metal wall, augs lighting the dark. He saw what the enforcers could not. When he spoke, it was to Varlan.

‘Those aren’t Guard-issue lasguns. They’re using modded mining lasers and las-cutters. Most of them look like miners, too. Some are dressed like enforcers. Those have riot-guns. It’s messy, ma’am. Orders?’

‘Where the hell is Borges? He has to rally his people now!’ She tried to contact him on the vox. ‘Lieutenant, this is Varlan. Respond!’

‘Damn it, interrogator. What in blazes have you gotten us into?’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m in the avenue just north of you.’

Oroga poked his head out again. ‘I see him, ma’am. Him and Caradine.’

A bright beam of las-fire flashed towards him, and the bodyguard pulled his head back just in time. The beam struck the ground, vaporising ice and cutting a deep furrow in the stone below. Both of the twins had drawn hellpistols from their shoulder holsters. Varlan had powered up her plasma pistol. The blue-purple glow of its charged energy coils lit the wall against which the three now huddled.

‘We need to get you out of here, ma’am,’ said Myrda. ‘We could break for the

tunnel we came through. If we can bottleneck their pursuit, we can do things our way.'

The cold voice from before spoke again. 'Do not throw your lives away. Embrace the Master. You need not die, only evolve. Put down your weapons. You will not be harmed. You will be shown the light.'

It seemed to come from everywhere at once. Varlan shivered, despite sweating inside her thermasuit. Beads rolled down her back, irritating her. She wished she could take the damned thing off. The voice tugged at her, so persuasive, so seductive. Had she not been trained to resist such things, she realised, it would have made her step out into the open. 'Psyker,' she spat. 'Their leader is a psyker. Can you feel it?'

Oroga and Myrda glanced at each other and nodded. They, too, sensed it. Like Varlan, they too had been trained to resist. But the enforcers...

'We have to get you out, ma'am.'

More weapons-fire split the dark, strobing so sharp and bright it lit the cavern like a captive thunderstorm. Varlan winced. 'Borges and Caradine are only about ten metres away, correct?'

Oroga nodded grimly.

'We regroup with them first. Then we pull back with as many of the enforcers as we can. Let's move. Oroga, knock out their lights.'

'Ma'am.'

He broke from cover at a run, firing two shots up towards the nearest rooftops from which the thick beams of spotlights knifed through the chill air. Within a second of each other, both lights exploded, showering hot glass on the shadowy figures operating them.

Varlan and Myrda broke from cover, moving swiftly behind Oroga as he sprinted for the avenue where Borges was pinned down. A figure stepped out from a darkened doorway on Oroga's right, hefting a heavy mining laser, preparing to fire from the hip. Blindingly fast, Oroga swerved towards the figure and launched a blistering right hook. His augmented arm jolted just before impact, igniting a small propellant charge that made his metal fist jack forwards like a piston. The sound was like a riot-gun discharging. The impact took the shadow's head clean off its shoulders. The body tumbled to the icy floor, dropping the mining laser. Oroga slid back into cover beside Borges and Caradine. Barely a second later, Varlan and Myrda joined him.

Borges was furious, face twisted with impotent rage. 'What the bloody hell is going on here?' he stormed.

‘What does it look like, lieutenant? Get your men back to the entry tunnel right now. Tell them to fall back. Staggered retreat. The enemy knows the terrain. They have the numbers. We can’t win this here.’

Borges’s eyes were almost bugging out of their sockets.

‘Now listen here,’ he rasped, so close to Varlan’s face she could smell the bile on his breath. He was scared, despite the words he spoke next. ‘I’m not about to turn and run from a bunch of bloody miners. This is—’

He was drowned out by a staccato burst of gunfire from nearby. Someone howled, high and long, the sound filled with raw agony. An instant later, the scream was cut off. A chilling laugh replaced it, filled with cruelty and malice.

‘Throne, man, if you think these are just angry labourers...’ hissed Varlan. ‘There are men among them with enforcer uniforms and weapons. Somehow I doubt they’re just playing dress-up. You’ve had traitors in your ranks, lieutenant. Emperor alone knows for how long. Is it any wonder they knew we were coming? We can’t win this here. They have us on the back foot, and their leader is some kind of psyker. Pull your men out now. Give the command while you still have some left to follow it.’

Scowling, Borges addressed his embattled men over the sound of cracking las-cutter and plasma fire and riot-guns barking in deep reply.

‘This is Force Command to all units. Back to the tunnel, all of you. Break contact. We’re getting out of here. That’s an order.’

‘Right,’ said Varlan. ‘Now we move.’

Just then, shadows burst from the alleys on either side of the squat structure behind which they hid. Myrda’s pistol blew a melon-sized hole in the torso of the first before anyone else had even registered it. Varlan herself got the other – the powerful blast of her plasma pistol atomising all but the booted feet of her would-be attacker. Borges and Caradine both winced with pain when the bright flash of Varlan’s weapon damned near blinded them with its discharge glow. The air crackled with skin-prickling residual energy.

‘Caradine,’ barked Varlan, taking charge. ‘You’re on point. Oroga and Myrda will cover the retreat. Borges, you move with me. We follow Caradine. Get moving, sergeant!’

Caradine was up and running a heartbeat later. Varlan and Borges broke into a run just behind him. Then, the twins moved, their low-light vision picking out threats on the roofs and between the boxy structures.

They ran for what seemed only moments, time compressed by adrenal rush, before Varlan looked past Caradine’s shoulders and saw a tunnel mouth ahead.

Caradine had guided them incredibly well, not an instant of doubt or hesitation, despite his lack of augmetics or low-light optical gear.

*Too well.*

The thought slowed her. She put out a hand to stop the others. Something wasn't right about this.

'Caradine,' she called to him. 'How did you—'

Caradine slowed, stopped and turned. He aimed the barrel of his riot-gun right at her chest and grinned. With his left hand, he reached up and took off his combat helmet. Varlan gasped. In the dark, no longer hidden by a visor, his eyes glowed with a strange, unwholesome light.

'Sergeant,' snapped Borges, skidding to a halt beside Varlan. 'What the hell are you doing, man?'

Caradine adjusted his aim and pulled the trigger. There was a bright muzzle flash and a deafening crack. Borges howled in agony and collapsed to the cold cavern floor. Varlan dropped beside him at once. His left leg, she saw, had been blown off at the knee. The sharp smell of his blood mixed with burned cordite.

Caradine strode closer to them, chuckling to himself.

Varlan readied to launch herself at the man as soon as he was within reach of a killing blow. She knew she could disarm and kill him if he would just step into range. Frustratingly, Caradine stopped just beyond it and levelled his gun barrel at her face.

'Now, now,' he said in a gloating, sing-song voice. 'Don't get any ideas, woman.'

Myrda and Oroga fired another volley of shots back down the avenue and turned to find their principal looking down the muzzle of a riot-gun. They would have surged in front of her, giving their lives for her without hesitation, but both judged the distance they would need to cover in a single glance. There was no way they could get in front of Caradine's weapon before he could pull that trigger.

They halted, hissing curses, coiled to spring, but unwilling to take the risk until a better opportunity arose.

'Drop your damned weapons or she dies,' growled Caradine. 'Do it!'

Oroga and Myrda glanced at Varlan. For a second only, the interrogator hesitated. Then she nodded for them to abandon the pistols they held. She knew it would lull Caradine into false confidence. He didn't know how deadly the twins were even without the pistols.

Once the weapons were dropped to the ground, Caradine ordered the twins to

kick them away, which they did with equal reluctance.

From the cold cavern floor, Borges spoke through gritted teeth. ‘Why, Draz? We’ve served together for thirteen years. I was there at the birth of your daughter, for Throne’s sake!’

Caradine didn’t turn his eyes from Varlan as he replied. A tone of almost maniacal zeal had entered his voice. ‘You can’t possibly imagine the glory that has come to Chiaro, lieutenant. None of you can. Not yet. I was chosen before you. For years, I’ve served, and you never had a clue. You will know soon enough, though. The Master will grant you wisdom, power, understanding. You’ll never get sick. Never get old. You’ll be stronger, faster, see in the dark. You’ll see the truth once you accept the Master’s kiss.’

‘You’re a bloody madman,’ spat Borges. ‘Come to your senses!’

‘Oh, I assure you he’s quite coherent,’ said someone from the shadows on the right. Varlan recognised the chilling voice even before she turned. The figure, impressively tall, completely unhurried in its movements, emerged with regal strides from between two stocky hab-blocks. Varlan’s opticom showed her his features in stark detail. Her stomach clenched. Here was the priest-like figure who had led the strange ceremony, his tall slender form hidden beneath the folds of his robe, his long staff carried upright in his left hand.

He stopped several metres from Varlan.

‘At last we meet face to face,’ he said. ‘Please, do not try to fight your way out, interrogator. It would be utterly futile, and killing you would be a lamentable waste of good material. Besides, this little skirmish is over. My people are gathering the bodies of your enforcers even as we speak. Listen,’ he added, and cocked his head.

The sounds of the fight were dying off. Few shots could be heard. Even as Varlan registered this, the last riot-gun fell silent.

‘They will not be wasted, living or dead,’ said the cult priest. ‘The Master has a role for all of them. They will contribute, one way or another, and the Master’s flock shall grow.’

He stepped closer to Varlan now, his movements smooth and fast, then raised a hand and gripped her by her slender jaw. It was what she had been waiting for. This was the time to launch an attack. Her mind sent a lethal impulse to her right arm.

Nothing happened.

She could not move.

The strange priest laughed. ‘Something wrong, interrogator?’ He turned her

head to left and right, appraising her. Varlan, her muscles refusing to respond to her will, could only study him back. His eyes were larger than they should have been, and of a colour unknown in natural human development. The pupils were abnormal, too, each shaped like a rounded hourglass. This was the second time she had noted their strangeness, the first having been through the eyes of Asset 16. The cult priest's teeth were also disturbing, seeming to number more than they should, each the same size and shape, dangerously pointed at the tip with a milky, semi-transparent quality. They made her think of the vicious snagglefish that populated the equatorial rivers of her home world.

*This is no man.*

'I know what you are,' she spat. 'Xenos hybrid scum.'

The priest laughed and shook his head. 'Do you think you offend me? I may not be a pureblood, but I am blessed, while you are cursed. You know nothing of my race. We do not kill our own. We do not waste our energy in wars among ourselves. Our destiny is too grand for that. You cannot begin to conceive of the coming change. Mankind is pathetic. To us, it is you who are the xenos. But we will not waste you. We will utilise you – fuel for our expansion towards the ultimate destiny of all life. You will understand soon. We will not kill you, Shianna Varlan. Your cells boast too fine a poetry. Instead, you shall make a splendid mother to the next generation of kindred. Yes, and what strong children you will have.'

As the strange priest had spoken, Lieutenant Borges slowly, carefully managed to grip his pistol from beneath his body. He withdrew it and took aim at Sergeant Caradine's head. He couldn't line the shot up properly without giving his intention away, so he used best judgement and hoped for the Emperor's blessing.

Caradine was distracted by the cult leader's words, his face betraying his rapture at standing in such close proximity to the eerie religious figure. Borges said a quick prayer in his mind and pulled the trigger of his autopistol. The shot rang out, deafeningly loud. Caradine's head rocked backwards, a gout of steaming blood leaping into the air to splash on the frozen floor a moment later.

His lifeless body hit the ground with a thud, the riot-gun clattering as it spun away.

The hybrid priest turned, scowling, distracted for just an instant, and Varlan struck at once, a knife-hand strike to the cult leader's throat. It would have killed any normal man. She had used it before to just such effect, stiffened fingers fatally striking a major nerve bundle. But in this instance, her fingers met cold, rigid resistance. They buckled painfully and she hissed at the sharp jolt of agony.

One of her fingers broke.

The priest laughed again, showing those innumerable small pointed teeth gleaming in the black hole of his wide mouth. His hand flashed up, cuffing her on the side of the head. Varlan fell, stars reeling in her vision.

Myrda and Oroga were already surging forwards, but it was too late. Powerful figures flooded from the black alleyways on either side, casting off canvas robes to reveal grotesquely misshapen humanoid forms. Each was at least two metres tall, their flesh strangely ribbed and wet-looking. Oroga had a brief glance of body-armour made of some kind of organic resin, but then the giants were on him. He heard Myrda grunt in pain, but there was no chance to look. A bony arm shot out towards him, fingers clenched in a fist. Oroga couldn't believe the speed of it. He had seldom come across anyone or anything that could strike faster than he could. He tried to ride the blow on his metal forearm, but his movement was a fraction of a second too late. The blow connected with his jaw, breaking it, staggering him back towards the wall of the hab behind him. He never hit it. He tripped on something and fell. He registered a hot, sticky wetness that didn't belong in such a cold, stony place as this. He scrambled backwards and looked down at the thing over which he'd fallen. It was the remains of his sister. Her ribcage had been pulled apart and her heart torn straight from her chest. Steam lifted into the air as her blood-slick body quickly cooled.

Fuelled by rage and torment, Oroga loosed a battle-cry and launched himself upwards, determined to have revenge. One of the towering grotesques was already behind him, however. As Oroga came up, the twisted humanoid gripped his jaw in one hand and the back of his head with the other. The strength in those sharp-clawed hands was immense. Oroga heard his own skull crack. Then the giant twisted, sudden and hard. Oroga's connective tissues ripped apart. His head came off in the giant's hands. His body collapsed limp like an empty sack.

All this had taken only seconds, during which Varlan had been slumped on the ground, practically insensate. She was shaken out of it by Borges. He was propped up on one arm, trying to get her to take his gun. His leg was bleeding out like a fountain and his supporting arm kept slipping. He was fading, dying and he knew it.

'Take it,' he hissed at her. 'Kill that bastard while you still—'

Varlan heard a whooshing sound. Wind whipped her hair.

Where Borges's head had been, there was suddenly nothing but wet darkness. His supporting arm gave out. His body flopped to the cavern floor.

Varlan felt sharp fingernails, hard and cold as iron, bite into her upper arms.

Without any apparent effort, she was hoisted into the air and slung over the shoulder of one of the grotesques. She found it hard to focus her eyes, still dizzy from the priest's blow. But when the monstrosity that carried her began walking, she saw the priest fall in behind them, eyes locked to hers, such a sickening look of satisfaction on his face. Behind him, other strange figures bent to lift the corpses of Lieutenant Borges, her aides and even that of the traitorous Sergeant Caradine.

*A resource. Fuel for the expansion. They waste nothing.*

She was the last one left alive, but that was hardly something to be thankful for. Her fate, she knew, would be far worse unless she ended her life right now. A mother, the priest had said. Ordimas Arujo had warned her. She wanted to weep, but that was not something Shianna Varlan ever did. She had a single choice left. Looking down at the rings on her fingers, she knew one of them still held a charge, a single bolt of energy that would be enough to end her life and spare her from the horror to come. *Do it*, she thought. *Kill yourself, Shianna. Don't let them do what they will.*

She almost convinced herself, too, but in the end, she was an interrogator of the Ordo Xenos. Her life was not her own to end. It belonged to the Ordo, and to His Lordship. Her opticom was logging everything in that special partition of her brain. Somehow, His Lordship would find a way to get her out. If not, then at least he would recover the intelligence she was now uniquely positioned to gather. For that, she would endure. It might mean the difference between life and death for countless others.

For just a moment, she wondered if His Lordship had known this might happen. His psykers were powerful. Had he sent her here knowing capture was written in her future? Was it this very circumstance that best served his veiled purpose? No. She couldn't believe that. Mustn't believe it. Her loyalty was the foundation of everything in which she trusted. He would get her out somehow. He would send someone, perhaps even his angels of death.

*Until then, I will suffer what I must, observe all I can. Emperor Omniscient, I pray only that salvation come soon, whether rescue or death.*

The monstrosity that carried her left the underground dome of the shift-station behind. Narrow, frost-covered walls slid past on either side. The creature was taking her deeper into the old mines. The hybrid priest strode behind, his unblinking eyes always on her. She did not know it then, but they would travel for hours to reach the lair of the so-called Master. All sign of human handiwork would disappear. They would travel through tunnels carved in solid rock by the

powerful bio-acids of great prehistoric worms. They would traverse narrow stone walkways and vast echoing caverns cut and shaped by geological time and, at the end of it, they would reach a place Varlan lacked the vocabulary to describe, save that it resembled nothing that could have come from a human mind.

It was here, in this foul place, this alien den of soul-swallowing horror, that Shianna Varlan's slow descent into madness and destruction would begin.

It was here that her children would be born.

Ninety-eight Space Marines stood in the great hall, all clad in black robes, their hoods thrown back. Ninety-eight grizzled warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, waiting like statues set in rows of ten, all save the front row of eight in which Lyandro Karras stood.

They gazed up at the vast hovering head of the Watch Commander, Zaharan Jaeger, supreme authority at Damaroth, holo-projected onto the incense-heavy air. As was his right, Jaeger had donned ancient Terminator armour, both to celebrate the day and to lend it an indisputable gravity. The vid-picter that captured his image couldn't quite encompass his massive armoured shoulders and cowl. At the sides, the hovering holo-projection appeared abruptly cropped. Nevertheless, the tech-adepts had done fine work. The raw presence of the giant armoured form in the air above them, almost god-like, was felt by all. It held every eye. Jaeger's voice boomed from vox-grilles set high in the carved stone pillars and buttresses that held up the frescoed ceiling so far overhead.

'Second Oath, my brothers. More significant than you can yet comprehend. It is here today that you truly become Deathwatch. Your training has been intense – a testing time, I know. For some more than others, our doctrines are a thing hard learned. We are no marching army to go knocking on gates, as you are now all too aware. Throne willing, you will return one day to the Chapters that made you, all the more capable of strengthening them with what you've learned, better able to serve their needs, because you were Deathwatch, and you stood as a bastion against that most heinous of tides. The xenos give no quarter. Good. We ask none and never shall. They are beasts, a vermin infestation, a cancer in this universe, and they think mankind mere slaves or prey. Let them. In that very arrogance lies their defeat. They know not our true strength. *Your* strength. For it is you, newest of my Deathwatch brothers, who shall cast them down into dark oblivion.

'Since the Apocryphon Conclave of Orphite IV, the defence of the Imperium from forces inhuman has fallen to us. It is in our strength, our zeal, that mankind unknowingly finds its salvation. We have stood watch for almost ten thousand years. Vigilant, my brothers. Vigilant and bold. And we ask no thanks. Tribute matters little to such as we. Our fight is in the shadows, and in those shadows we

must remain. Take pride instead in what you are: first among equals, warriors cast anew in sharper, deadlier form. No filth born of alien blood can rival you. You were Space Marines, but now you transcend even that.

‘As you take Second Oath, pour all your commitment into the words you speak. There is no going back. Once you pass through these doors’ – here he gestured to an ornately carved portal in the wall on his right – ‘you will be bolted into your power armour. On your left shoulder shall be the icon of our sacred order. On your right you shall bear the icon of your Chapter, for your service honours both, and a betrayal is a betrayal to both. Make no mistake about that. The rest of your armour, save the silver left arm, has been painted black, for shadow is your ally in this desperate fight. You don the black and cloak yourself in darkness both. Think on that a moment. Think on how few, even among the greatest you have known, ever get to bear that honour. I hope each of you understand its implications.

‘It is a thing of life-changing significance, this oath you take today. Remember the instructions of your Watch sergeants and do as you are bid. Secrecy is law among us. Hold to that. Those who break the oaths made to our order suffer the penalty of death. No exceptions. Those who betray their bond face execution. Those who run are hunted down. Those that came before you understood this. To these laws, each of your Chapters swore when they signed the Old Accord. Renegades and oath-breakers will find no succour among kin, for aiding a renegade is itself a crime. Do not stain the honour of those who sent you. And do not stain the honour of those who have worked so hard to see you succeed.’

Here, Jaeger cast a glance at the Watch sergeants, who stood quietly, heads bowed, by the side of the great dais from which he spoke. His vast hololithic image, however, appeared to look not at the sergeants, but at the glorious banners which hung from brass rods fixed high on the smooth stone walls. Turning back to face the ordered rows of oath-takers, Jaeger continued: ‘Now, it is time for you to step forward. The moment has come. We begin with the Librarians. Watch Captain Xavian, call forth the first oath-taker.’

Jaeger stepped away from his golden lectern and his hololith disappeared, like a towering ghost melting back into strange dimensions.

A Watch captain stepped forwards, his black armour chased with gold, embossed with skulls and laurel motifs. His voice was sharp and high, a rapier sound in contrast to the thunder hammer boom of Jaeger’s.

‘We call upon Ledahn Sandaro Arrexius, Epistolary of the Iron Lords, chosen of his kin, pledged to the service of our order by oath and accord. Come forth.

Stand before all and make your pledge.’

Arrexius, a quiet, stern individual with whom Karras had shared only the briefest of words, moved from his place in the front row of Space Marines. Walking solemnly down the central aisle, head bowed, hands pressed to his chest in the sign of the aquila, he looked like a penitent monk. He stopped by the bottom step of the dais. Before him was a block of dark oak, its uppermost surface covered in thick red velvet. Upon this, Arrexius knelt.

Karras watched intently. He breathed deeply, inhaling the rich incense that hung on the air.

*I am ready, he told himself. I am ready.*

The floor trembled a little as Zaharan Jaeger, in his massive Tactical Dreadnought armour, descended the broad marble steps, flanked on his right by Watch Chaplain Qesos. They stopped on the final step and looked down at the bowed and kneeling Arrexius waiting patiently before them.

*As they will soon look at me, thought Karras.*

Chaplain Qesos gestured towards a group of figures waiting in the left wing of the hall. Two servitors ambled forwards, one carrying a finely crafted tripodal stand of black iron, the other a dish of black ceramite filled with blazing hot coals. They placed these things by Qesos – the dish of coals atop the stand – and shuffled back to their original position.

Qesos gestured again, and a slim male Rothi, face masked in white porcelain as they always were, stepped close to present the Chaplain with a rod of steel topped with the skull-and-bones symbol of the Watch. The Chaplain took it, dismissed the Rothi, and pushed the brand between the glowing coals.

Jaeger spoke.

‘Brother Arrexius, look at me now. Look into my eyes as you make your pledge.’

Arrexius looked up into the gold-irised eyes of the titanic figure in front of him.

‘Do you, Ledahn Sandaro Arrexius, scion of the Iron Lords, swear your loyal service to the Deathwatch for so long as it may be needed?’

‘On the blood of my brothers, so do I swear,’ said Arrexius with clenched-jaw conviction.

‘Do you, Ledahn Sandaro Arrexius, scion of the Iron Lords, swear to stand tall beside your fellow Space Marines, no matter their Chapter, no matter the scars of the past, to fight side-by-side against the xenos threat at the cost of your very life?’

‘On the bones of the primarchs, so do I swear.’

‘And do you, Ledahn Sandaro Arrexius, now and forever more scion of the Deathwatch, pledge your very soul to the holding of this order’s doctrines, laws and secrets? Swear to this now with all your heart and hold this oath above all else, or forfeit all memory of your time here and be returned to your Chapter in disgrace.’

‘On the eternal sacrifice of the Emperor Himself, so do I swear.’

The words rang out, echoing from the walls. It was the most solemn oath any had heard since swearing fealty to their own lords, their Chapter Masters, and to the martial brotherhoods that had forged them.

Jaeger lifted his massive plated arms, servos whirring, pistons hissing, and turned his eyes to the assembly. ‘Second Oath is observed. Death be upon all who renege.’

‘Second Oath is observed,’ intoned the assembled warriors.

The Watch Commander turned his dark eyes back to Arrexius. ‘Ready yourself, brother, to accept the mark of your promise.’

Arrexius opened his robe and dropped it back to reveal an upper body thick with that hard, ropey muscle so typical of a Space Marine. His skin was somewhat pale, Karras noted, there being no natural sunlight on Damaroth to turn it brown, and it bore scars and old burns in numbers not easily counted. His back looked like the street map of some bustling hive-city, such was the history of battle written on his flesh. At the base of his skull, Karras could see the shining black metal of the I/O sockets by which a Librarian could interface with a psychic hood. Beneath this, an inch or so down the spine, he saw also the arachnid form of the warp field suppression implant. The sight of it sitting there embedded in a fellow Librarian’s flesh caused a brief surge of disgust that Karras had to consciously expunge from his mind.

*It won’t be long now until they remove the warp-cursed thing,* he told himself.

Chaplain Qesos pulled the brand, now white hot, from the coals, gripped Arrexius’s left shoulder with his free hand and said, ‘Duty and honour never to be forgotten.’

‘Duty and honour!’ growled Arrexius, bracing himself for the pain to come.

Qesos pushed the glowing brand hard against the Librarian’s bared left pectoral. There was the sound of hissing as skin cells blistered and died, followed by the uppermost layers of tissue beneath. Arrexius tensed, muscles locking hard, and ground his teeth, but he gave no voice to his agony.

Qesos pulled the brand away and returned it to the brazier of coals.

Jaeger spoke again.

‘Stand, Brother Ledahn, Space Marine of the Deathwatch!’

Arrexius stood and, after a moment’s pause, fixed his robed about himself once more. At the sides of the hall and on the upper levels of the dais itself, the Watch sergeants and Watch captains clashed their armoured fists against their breastplates three times in salute. In the echoing quiet of the great hall, the sound was like thunder. Watch Commander Jaeger gestured once again to the carved doors on the right. Two hunched tech-adepts stood on either side of the doorway, their red shrouds bearing the icons of both the Deathwatch and the Adeptus Mechanicus.

With his oath taken, Arrexius saluted, fist to chest, ignoring the fire in his flesh, and moved off through the doors, followed by the two tech-adepts, both of whom bowed low to him as he strode past.

‘Watch Captain Xavian,’ boomed Jaeger, ‘call forth the next oath-taker.’

‘We call upon Morbius Galus,’ announced Xavian, ‘Codicier of the Doom Eagles, chosen of his kin, pledged to the service of our order by oath and accord. Come forth. Stand before all and make your pledge.’

Galus stepped out into the centre aisle from beside Karras and marched forwards.

*And then there was one*, thought Karras, for he would be the last of the Librarians to take the oath.

He could feel the weight of the coming moment, the sacrifice this oath demanded. His words would divide his loyalties for the first time in his life. But this was what his Chapter wanted. This was what it had asked of him. This was why he had been sent. He was more at ease with that now. He had given himself up to the hypno-induction, and it had taken effect. His loyalties did not need to be divided merely because he fought under a different banner. He would still wear his order’s sigil into war. Serving the Watch meant serving the will of the First Spectre. His mind had been re-conditioned to accept it as truth, and so he did.

*Megir, watch over me. Khadit, guide me. Let my actions honour you both.  
I shall not fail you.*

## 19

Lord Sannra sat behind his desk, looking down at its richly grained surface, unspeaking, unmoving, numb to the core. He could still hear High Commissioner Taje's boots receding down the corridor outside the room. The man had left in a fury, slamming the heavy doors behind him. Sannra wasn't a man who shrank from a shouting match, and he wasn't intimidated by the Civitas commander, but Taje's words had left him too stunned to take immediate issue.

Sul sat opposite his lord, likewise stunned, gazing into the shadow below the edge of the desk with a thousand-yard stare.

*All of them?* thought Sannra. *Even that lethal-looking female bodyguard?*

It was in this very room that Lady Devanon – *no, Interrogator Varlan* – had saved him from an assassin's bullet.

His own staff. His own bloody staff!

He glanced over at the wall on his right. In a way, he was glad the painting of the old man was ruined. There had always been an unsettling quality about it, as if the eyes were ever on him, judging him, criticising. Good riddance to it, priceless or not.

The crisis tunnel behind the painting had since been covered with another piece, something far less intrusive, a wonderful oil of the famed fire-trees on Kalhrada.

*One day, I shall go there and see them for myself.*

He tutted at himself, knowing that such idle thoughts were his attempt to avoid facing the current mess, to shy from the implications of Taje's report.

Forty Civitas enforcers lost. Seven Viper LAVs. And not a sign or word from anyone in the interrogator's group. Taje was right to be angry, of course. Sannra, shaken by the assassination attempt on his own life, hadn't given the High Commissioner ample time to organise a proper response. There hadn't seemed much need. No one really believed the whole of Chiarite society was at risk, did they? Just a miner's revolt, he'd thought it. In fact, it was more the interrogator's fault than his own that Taje's people had vanished. It was she who had demanded the escort, she who had insisted a fully armed expeditionary force must be formed and deployed at once. Maybe they would show up alive. There hadn't

been any bodies to speak of. Not yet.

‘Vox-comms are notoriously unreliable underground, Sul. Is that not so?’

Sul looked unconvinced, disinclined to pass it off as easily as that, and now Sannra felt his own doubts stealing back over him. He spoke again, keeping his eyes on the bright reds and yellows of the burning trees. ‘I suppose if there were any real hope, the High Commissioner wouldn’t have been in quite such a state. He ought to know better than either of us. The question is what to do about it. That lovely woman. I doubt we shall be seeing her again. Such a waste!’

Sul seemed on the verge of responding to that, but held his tongue.

Sannra looked at him. ‘If you’ve anything to say, Sul...’

The aide looked up.

‘With the greatest respect, m’lord, I feel that this is a matter for law enforcement. Surely our only real priority here is to ensure your personal safety. Whatever the extent of the threat – and it must be significant given that the Inquisition sent an agent at all – I’d say the population of Chiaro and the Imperium in general would be best served by your immediate removal from the area of risk. Forgive me if that sounds small-minded, m’lord, but your wellbeing is always my foremost concern. I can’t abide the thought of these rebels or heretics or whatever striking a blow against the nobility.’ Now he, too, glanced at the painting which had replaced the old portrait. ‘They might not fail a second time.’

Sannra saw his aide shiver at the thought.

*Good old Suliman. Such loyalty. I’m lucky to have you.*

‘A return to the palace at Najra, then? Have the staff prepare for departure. And have my train car readied.’

Sul leaned forwards in his chair and placed his hands flat on his master’s desk. ‘Forgive me, lord, but Najra is not nearly far enough. Your enemies may already have agents in place there. They may have predicted such a move.’

‘Go on.’

‘The ship on which the interrogator arrived, m’lord. The *Macedon*. It’s still in orbit. The cargo shuttle has already been refuelled and is scheduled to depart in two days’ time, according to my contact in the Officio Transportarum. I’m sure the captain – a man by the name of Dozois – could be persuaded to leave earlier. With enough coin in his pocket, of course.’

‘Leave Chiaro entirely? Given the crisis, surely I’d face charges of dereliction.’

‘Not so, m’lord. The trip could be officially listed as diplomatic under Section

3. It's not unknown for planetary governors to visit subsector neighbours in the interests of securing defence or trade agreements and the like. And I can backdate the official papers. I'm thinking either Melnos or Purdell, both of which have day-night cycles. It would be a welcome change, I'm sure you'll agree.'

Sannra was quiet as he thought about that.

'It couldn't be a long trip,' he told his aide. In his heart, he wanted to leave Chiaro as soon, and for as long, as possible. He enjoyed his position, but he had never loved this planet, just as the planet had no love for humankind. Chiaro seemed to grudge man's presence here. Those who made mistakes, whether on Dayside or Nightside, did not often live to make them again. Were it not for the Nystarean Gorge, men might never have settled here.

'Melnos is the nearest of the two, m'lord,' said Sul. 'Temperate, if a tad underpopulated. It's mostly given over to automated agriculture, but the capital should entertain you – the City of Duma. And the Imperial Zoological Gardens are a sight to behold if reports read true. House Agiese hold the governorship. The ruling lord is close to your own age and a gregarious man by all accounts.'

'The gravity, Sul. The gravity.'

'Point eight, m'lord.'

Sul smiled knowingly.

*Ah, thought Sannra, the women will be tall and slender. That settles it.*

'Very well. Make all the necessary preparations. A staff of eight should be enough, yes? And my two best House guards. Blasedale and that other one. The big Hasmiri bruiser, Kaseed. Secure the agreement of this Dozois character. And brief my valet on what to pack for the Melnosi climate.'

Sul rose from his chair with the beginnings of a smile, enthusiastic for his work, glad to have a clear purpose again. He bowed to his master. 'With your leave, m'lord.'

As he was retreating to the door, Sannra called him to a halt.

'One last thing, Sul.'

'M'lord?'

There was a pause. 'I know I don't say it often, but a man in my position ought to recognise the value of his people. Know that I do. Recognise your value, I mean.'

Sul was somewhat taken aback, but only for the briefest instant. 'You need never thank me, m'lord. It's not necessary. The pleasure I derive from serving House Sannra is, and has always been, my greatest reward.'

Sannra grinned at his aide. ‘Send in my darling swans. I want to share the news of the trip myself.’

‘Very good, sir.’

The little man shuffled away, turning only to close the double doors behind him.

The planetary governor began tapping a runeboard on his desk, calling up hololithic display data. Melnos appeared in miniature, rotating in the space before him.

*Yes, thought Sannra. Taje can deal with this mess on his own. That’s his job. I’m sure he and his men don’t need the added pressure of worrying about my safety. Besides, I’m due a vacation.*

*I may even find another pair of twins.*

## 20

When Ordimas returned, he found the little basement hab in darkness. Part of him had expected Nedra to be awake, awaiting his return from the meeting with White Phoenix. It was very late, however, and the boy had no doubt succumbed to sleep despite his eagerness to see the puppeteer come home safe.

Ordimas let himself in quietly, relying on his augmented eye to see his way around the hab in the dark.

Sure enough, Nedra lay in his cot, curled up and silent. There was a bowl of salted beans on the table, only half of them eaten. The boy had tried to force himself, but anxiety for Ordimas's safety had robbed him of his appetite.

*When he awakes, thought Ordimas, we will eat well.*

In truth, Ordimas had no appetite of his own. It wasn't just the horrors he had witnessed in the mines – horrors he had been part of, he reminded himself with a sick feeling. He was still enduring some of the after-effects of the nucleocode drug. On leaving the mines, he had sought out a hiding place in the sewers. He would have preferred to weather the effects of the crash in his own cot, of course, but the sight of the miner, Mykal, striding through the hab door would have been too much for poor Nedra. He did not know that Ordimas could take the shape of others. He would have assumed the worst and either attacked what he thought was his one-time abuser, or fled in terror. So Ordimas had endured the crash surrounded by filth and sewer-stink. That was two days ago, and still his head was pounding and his muscles ached incessantly. He didn't think the interrogator had noticed. Feigning weakness was one thing, but genuine weakness had to be covered. Showing it was never a good idea. During their meeting, he had felt his death all too close at hand. He would not have been overly surprised if the woman had tried to execute him.

Ordimas moved to the small kitchen and poured himself a cup of water.

*This damned headache is killing me.*

He returned to the table in the main room, drew a chair and sat down, weary beyond anything he could remember.

*I don't want to do this any more. Maybe I'll just take the boy and leave. No more missions. No more shape-shifting. I'll become a puppeteer for real. It's an honest enough living.*

The thought amused him. Surely no puppeteer in Imperial history had ever amassed as much wealth as Ordimas Arujo had. His Lordship paid well, though he asked all too much in return.

Ordimas scowled.

*If we run, I'll not be able to access my accounts. Most of that money will be lost to me. Am I really ready to turn my back on it? Throne, I never use it anyway. It just keeps accruing.*

Perhaps it was exhaustion. Perhaps it was the long crash of the nucleocode drug. Either way, Ordimas was genuinely caught off-guard when the tall figure dropped heavily from the ceiling and straightened in front of him.

The puppeteer leapt to his feet, his chair crashing to the floor behind him, but, as fast as he was, the intruder was faster. A powerful hand flashed out, catching Ordimas by the throat and lifting him into the air. His feet kicked out uselessly, his legs too short to strike at his attacker.

A strange, sibilant voice hissed from the shadows beneath the figure's hood.

'The Master sends his regards, agent of the Imperium. We enjoyed having you attend our little ceremony.'

Ordimas couldn't speak, couldn't even draw breath. The hand was tight around his neck, cutting off any hope of air. One of his kicking feet connected with the table. His cup smashed on the hab floor. Ordimas looked over to Nedra's cot, certain the sound would wake the boy. Maybe Nedra could get out alive if he moved fast enough.

But Nedra didn't stir, and Ordimas felt his heart sink.

'The boy died quickly,' hissed the intruder, noting the direction of the little mutant's gaze. 'Do not be sad. His flesh and bone will not be wasted. And neither will yours. The Master hopes to integrate your better genetic qualities into a new generation. You should be honoured.'

Now the intruder drew Ordimas closer, and Ordimas kicked again, connecting with full force. It didn't matter. It was like kicking concrete. The figure which held him barely shook at all from the impact. The grip tightened. Ordimas's vision blurred. He felt faint. Dimly, he registered hot breath on his face. He scrabbled for the poisoned blade in his waistband, but his fingers had gone clumsy as he edged towards death. He heard the knife clatter on the floor beneath him – a spirit-crushing sound. With his other hand, he reached up and pulled at the tall intruder's hood. It fell away.

Beneath was a face almost human. Almost, but clearly not.

The skin was bluish purple, the protruding eyes set too wide apart, the teeth

too numerous and sharp. There were no lips to speak of; the mouth was a wide, wet slash in glistening flesh.

*Hybrid, Ordimas thought. Hybrid. As my own child will be. And Nedra. Nedra is dead. Throne, I am so tired of all this. Let it end. If death gives me nothing else, at least it will give me peace.*

The hand that gripped him flexed hard. There was a muffled snap.

Ordimas went limp.

Minutes later, a tall dark figure in shapeless robes left the door of the hab, keeping to the shadows, a heavy sack carried over one shoulder, two bodies contained within. The sack-carrier made his way to the nearest manhole and descended into the sewers where he could move with greater speed and less caution.

In time, he would go to the Master's lair, there to cast his kills into the digestion pools. The bodies would be broken down, semi-digested into pungent organic sludge. Their matter would be remade, recast in lethal alien form to serve a higher, purer purpose.

So, too, would all life in the galaxy.

It was inevitable. Nothing could stop that beautiful dark unity.

Eventually, it would devour everything.

Sixteen hours after the decision had been made in his office, the Lord High Arbitrator of Chiaro found himself in a well-appointed passenger cabin aboard the *Macedon's* cargo shuttle as it hauled itself up towards orbit. On either side of him sat his tall, pale female companions, their long legs crossed beneath dresses of black silk. Sul stood nearby, ready to serve. In the chair across from the High Arbitrator sat Captain Higgan Dozois.

Lord Sannra would have liked a window. It was many years since he had left terra-firma. He had hoped to watch the curve of the planet fall away underneath him, to watch the stars intensify, but it was not to be. The shuttle's cockpit was built to accommodate a pilot and co-pilot only. Sannra made do with a reasonable amasec from the captain's personal store, which he sipped from a slender, fluted glass.

Higgan Dozois had not been a difficult man to buy. Though neither Sannra nor Sul knew anything about it, Dozois had managed to sell his entire shipment of narcotics with ease. The Rockheads had sent a senior gang lieutenant to negotiate with him. The meeting was tense, neither side quite trusting the other, but the price eventually agreed upon was fair, and the transfer of the drugs went smoothly. The Rockheads ought to make a tidy profit. Dozois got exactly what he'd expected for the yaga. No more. No less. Now, he was just glad to be off that accursed, egg-shaped world. He hadn't felt right since the moment he'd set eyes on it. Since he'd landed on it, he'd had the strangest sensation that he was missing something. At least the headaches had finally stopped.

With the sale of the yaga completed, he had quickly turned his thoughts to his outward journey. The Lord High Arbitrator's sudden and unexpected commission was more than welcome. Melnos wasn't far, and it was in the general direction he had been planning to take. If he had to put on extra airs and graces for a contract this profitable, so be it.

*A week's warp transit. A quick shuttle drop. Then off to Syclonis in the Gates of Varl for a resupply.*

'I'm confident you'll find the accommodation to your liking,' Dozois told his guests. 'The *Macedon* is a fine ship, if I say so myself. I've certainly never had any complaints. In fact, I believe my last passenger, a lady of House Devanon,

was some relation to you. Is that not so? I hope she's well.'

In truth, he hoped she was anything but. Thoughts of her made him confused and disoriented somehow. He remembered his frustration sharply enough. He hoped he'd soon forget it, and he mentioned her now only in a further attempt to curry favour with his well-heeled passenger.

Sannra and his aide shared a dark look. It was the aide who spoke up.

'A very distant relation only. Last we heard, Lady Fara was busily engaged in establishing a business venture in the city. I'm sure she found her passage with you most satisfactory.'

*How uncomfortable they are at the very mention of her, thought Dozois. Hiding something, both of them. I wonder if she made a fool of this Lord Sannra somehow. Perhaps it's best I don't mention her again.*

'I've a very fine dining room aboard,' he said, changing the subject. 'And the gallery on the upper deck provides quite spectacular views on planetary approach.' He gestured around the passenger cabin. 'It will more than make up for the lack of viewports on the shuttle, I assure you.'

Sannra was about to respond when a voice chimed from the speakers in the cabin's corners. 'Captain, forgive the intrusion, but I'm getting orders from both GDC and the Naval defence monitors to turn the shuttle around and head back to port. They... They're telling me the planet has just been placed under quarantine, sir.'

Dozois lost the polite smile he had painted on his face. The voice on the comm belonged to his pilot. He thrust himself forwards in his chair. 'They're telling you what?'

'GDC have us locked, sir, and both of the Navy boats are on intercept headings. If we don't turn back, they say they'll have no choice but to fire on us.'

Lord Sannra gaped. 'Sul?' he said shakily. 'Don't they know I'm on board?'

'All the relevant authorities were informed, my lord. This must be a mistake. It's the only possible explanation. Quarantine, indeed. Who ordered it?'

Dozois spoke to his pilot. 'Barrett, any word on who issued the no-fly order?'

'They say it's by order of the Holy Inquisition, sir. That can't be right, can it?'

Again there was a dark, knowing look that passed between the lord and his aide.

Dozois cursed. 'Whoever issued the damned order, I'm not about to have my ship fired upon. I think we had better do as they say.'

Lord Sannra looked helplessly at Sul, confusion and desperation both written

clearly on his face.

‘How far are we to the *Macedon*, captain?’ asked the aide.

The captain relayed the question to his pilot. The answer came back. Just a little over three minutes, according to the flight cogitator. Sul asked another question and got an answer for that, too. The Naval defence ships were sixteen minutes away. Any missile launched from groundside would take approximately six minutes to reach them. How long it would actually take GDC personnel to prepare a launch was anyone’s guess. In all the years men had occupied Chiaro, they had never once been forced to defend the planet. The few missile bases that existed were under-funded, undermanned and poorly maintained.

Sannra wouldn’t have gambled much on their not being able to muster a few ground-to-orbit missiles, but Sul seemed ready to play those odds.

‘Captain,’ said the aide sternly. ‘You will proceed to the *Macedon* as planned. Order your pilot to make haste. We will not be turning back.’

‘You can’t be serious, Sul,’ gasped Lord Sannra. ‘This is all tied to that damned woman. We have to turn back. We have to! I’m the Lord High Arbitrator. I can’t be fired on by my own planet’s defenders.’

The aide moved in a blur that defied his age and apparent frailty. Dozois watched in stunned silence as the little man plunged a knife deep into the breast of his lord and master. There was a wet, wheezing sound. Blood boiled up from between the aristocrat’s lips. Tears welled in his eyes as they rolled upwards, trying to meet those of his aide, asking why, why this terrible betrayal.

Sul’s expression didn’t change a bit. Even as he murdered the man he had served for more than thirty years, his expression was calm, almost placid, in stark contrast to the violent act.

The women on either side flew from their seats screaming hysterically. They bolted for the nearest door in a whirl of blonde hair and black fabric. Dozois suddenly wished he was wearing a weapon. With such a prominent passenger on board, he had decided not to, worried that it might send the wrong message. He cursed that decision now.

‘What in the Eye of Terror are you doing, man? You’ve just—’

Suliman ignored him. He turned his eyes to the women and called out, ‘Kindred!’

The doors to the passenger cabin slid open. Two towering nightmares of chitin, claw and sinew swung beneath them and into the room. They straightened, and their sickening purple-skinned skulls bumped against the cabin ceiling.

Each was a horror from the darkest nightmares of men, a glistening amalgam

of smooth armoured ridges and dark, striated muscle. Their claws were as long as machetes, as black as their soulless eyes and wickedly curved. They looked sharp enough to flense meat from living bone with ease. They stood on two legs, a short useless tail hanging limp behind them, and from their torsos hung four arms, long enough to reach the floor despite their height. But it was their faces that chilled the most – the quasi-human configuration of eyes and nose above a mouth more suited to some grotesque deep-sea monstrosity, the teeth like glass daggers, all set in a head horribly swollen and distorted, veins pulsing at the temples.

Both women fainted at once and hit the floor hard. Dozois, paralysed with fear, felt a hot wetness spread through his breeches from the area of his crotch. He began to shake uncontrollably.

The huge, six-limbed creatures bent over the women and lifted them effortlessly into the air. Blonde hair fell away, revealing two graceful, exposed necks. Alien eyes fixed on them.

‘Do it,’ hissed Suliman, tugging his knife from the cadaver of his former master. The wound made a sucking sound as the blade came free.

Dozois saw the monsters open their wide, razor-toothed jaws. He saw grotesque purple tongues whip out and back again, leaving raw red craters in pale human flesh. At the centre of those small, fresh wounds, implanted packets of alien DNA began their work, multiplying, diversifying, rewriting.

The beasts lay both women aside then turned their terrible black eyes on Dozois.

Suliman spoke from close by. The captain felt the wet point of a knife at his neck.

‘I’m sorry, captain,’ said Sul. ‘I forget to mention my family here would be joining us. They managed to clamber aboard while the cargo was being loaded. I hope you don’t mind, but, you see, we have something of a mission, they and I. We have to reach Melnos, or any populated planet, really, and your ship is the only chance we have. Now, don’t go getting any ideas, will you? You’ve a full life left ahead of you. A full, rich life still left to live. I’ll let you live it, too, so long as you get us to the *Macedon* quickly and get us out of this system. But I assure you, if you don’t, you *will* die. And it will be a far more painful experience than poor Lord Sannra’s. Mark my words.

‘Well, captain? What say you?’

The cargo shuttle docked with the *Macedon* just three minutes later. The body of

Lord Nengahem Sannra was left slumped in the shuttle's passenger cabin, his rich clothes soaked in cold, sticky blood.

Despite repeated calls from the Navy monitors and GDC to power down, Captain Higgan Dozois, now ensconced in his command throne with Suliman and his restless, kill-hungry monsters standing over him, ordered the warp engines brought online. He had little choice. He kept telling himself there might be a window later, a chance to turn things around, even to escape, but, as he looked out over the bridge at his terrified crew, all of them desperately trusting him, depending on him to keep them alive, he knew he was stuck. There was no way the crew could overpower Suliman's monsters. When they had first stepped onto the command bridge, two foolhardy ensigns had drawn small-arms and charged the creatures. Dozois had tried to shout them down, but it was too late. The abhorrent, six-limbed aliens had leapt on them, shrugging off their pathetic pistol-rounds without a scratch. In front of everyone, the ensigns had been torn to red tatters by clawed, inhuman hands.

Resistance was a death sentence.

*They'll kill us anyway, thought Dozois, or do what they did to those women. As soon as we're of no further use...*

He wasn't quite sure what he had witnessed back in the shuttle. The Lord High Arbitrator's women were certainly still alive – they had groaned as he and his captors had stepped over them – but the welts on their necks meant something. He just couldn't imagine what.

'Sir,' called out the chief auspex operator, 'those Navy boats are only seven minutes out. They're calling again for us to power down. And I now have three missile contacts approaching. The closest is six minutes off our port side.'

'Engines?' asked Dozois.

His helmsman looked up. 'Engines at sixty-two per cent, captain. We might outrun the missiles, or we could trust to the point-defence turrets to knock them out, but if those Navy ships have forward lance batteries—'

'Warp engines?' asked Dozois, cutting the helmsman off.

'At full now, sir, but the Navigator needs another four minutes of focus before we can breach.'

Sul leaned forwards and spoke low in the captain's ear. 'We'll all die together, captain, if you don't hurry this up. Jump blind if you have to. Just get us away from here. Now.'

'I'll handle it,' snapped Dozois. Before Suliman could add anything, the captain rose from his throne and stormed down from the command dais to the

floor of the bridge. ‘Mister Sael, step away from your station please. I’ll take this one.’

The shocked helmsman stepped back with a nod, his mouth open, but no words coming out. Dozois almost never took the helm himself.

The captain looked at the monitor. It was just as Sael had said. He might outrun the missiles or gun them down. He might even make warp before the Navy ships could open fire. But did he really want to?

The Ecclesiarchy were always banging on about the Emperor of Mankind and of eternal salvation at His side. Dozois had never gone in for it much. He had always lived for the moment. But at that moment, he hoped, truly hoped, that the priests were right, because he wasn’t going to ship those monsters to another planet full of innocent people.

Were he to allow the *Macedon*’s destruction at the hands of the Navy or Chiaro GDC, forever after, people would think of he and his crew as traitors or renegades. But, if he could only summon the courage to take responsibility himself, to pre-empt the very destruction he could not now escape, they would know. They would know someone on board had taken a stand.

*Holy Emperor, you had better be real.*

He hit a quick series of runes, shutting off the ship’s overrides and alarm systems. Then, with a sinking heart, he drew a finger across a dial on the monitor, setting the warp engines, which were already at full charge, to overload.

*Six seconds. It has been an honour and a pleasure, old girl. If there is a life after this...*

‘All hands,’ he called out, ‘brace for warp translation in five, four, three, two, one—’

The warp core implosion and the resulting explosions that ripped through the *Macedon* formed a twisting nexus of strange blue light in the Chiaro sky. It lasted several minutes. The people of Chiaro seldom looked up, but some did and wondered at it.

None would ever know the truth behind the destruction of that ship, not even those aboard the *Ventria* and the *Ultrix*, both of which had been close enough to feel the blast ripple through local space.

But by his last living action, Captain Higgan Dozois – in the eyes of many, a worthless, lecherous, drug-dealing rogue – saved the lives of sixty-four million people, the entire population of the planet Melnos.

At least, for a time.

If any had believed Second Oath would mean an easing of the trials faced at Damaroth, they soon discovered just how wrong they were. Kill-team allocations were announced and training resumed almost at once. At first, the Space Marines revelled anew in the upgrades and alterations that had been made to their wargear. The Watch's Techmarines and engineers were almost unrivalled in what they could achieve. Enhanced tactical data-feeds and real-time automapping, vastly superior low-light vision modes that needed only the slightest luminance to render everything in crystal clarity, sound-suppressive joint and actuator coatings to muffle excess armour noise by almost ninety per cent; the list went on.

The greatest marvel, perhaps, was the layer of tiny photo-reactive cells coating every visible surface of their plate. With an operative's power armour running quiet, stealth systems fully engaged, those cells would absorb and mimic the reflected light, colours and patterns of their surroundings, allowing the wearer to blend into the background like a chameleon. The effect wasn't perfect, especially when in motion, but it was impressive all the same. Karras had never seen anything like it. Between this and the new armaments available to them, the latest Deathwatch members felt all but invincible. But then the true tests began, and they quickly realised that, as hard as things had been *without* their armour, they were harder yet with it.

For Karras in particular, however, things were even harder still.

The Chief Librarian had opted to handle his squad introductions personally. As he and Karras walked a long, candlelit corridor, they talked of what had passed and what was to come. The suppressor on Karras's spine had been dialled down, allowing him limited access to his powers once more, but it had not been removed entirely as Karras had hoped it would. Patience, Lochaine counselled. As always, there were good reasons behind it. Karras had heard those words all too often by now, but he resigned himself to them. There was nothing he could do in any case. He was granted deeper access to the archives now, yet many were the times his searches hit a brick wall. A flashing pict-screen with the words *Access Denied: Clearance Level Inadequate* remained a common and infuriating sight. Many areas of the facility likewise remained off-limits, though the Great

Ossuary, where dead xenos specimens were preserved and displayed, and the Black Cenotaph, the Watch's Hall of Remembrance, were both open to him now during what little downtime he had.

'And you'll be able to select personally from the sensorium archives for your kill-team's sessions in the Librarius,' said Lochaine. 'I'd recommend you keep it varied for obvious reasons.'

*Because we don't know what we'll be going up against,* thought Karras. *I don't even know who we are.*

Lochaine sensed the Death Spectre's thoughts and the apprehension that attended them. 'There has never been a kill-team without conflicts of personality, Lyandro. That is a reality we have all had to face at some time or another. Our Chapters of origin mark us deeply. They make us who we are. They make us different to those we serve beside when we don the black. It is a difference that should be celebrated, not disdained. It is *that* difference which makes a Deathwatch kill-team unique, able to handle any crisis, to use the element of surprise, and to employ the unexpected. Though you will doubt it at first, you and your kill-team brothers will complement each other well. It is with this in mind that most allocations are made. In your case, however, things were a little... unorthodox.'

Karras stopped and stared at Lochaine.

'Unorthodox?'

Lochaine stopped too and turned, his expression dark. 'It is high time you were told of this. You are not to serve the Deathwatch as others do, Lyandro. The Inquisition has expressly requested that your kill-team – only yours – be placed under the direct aegis of an Ordo Xenos handler. We don't know why.'

Karras gaped. 'What?'

'It happens, though it is the exception rather than the rule. The Ordo Xenos has great need of our services. Their strength lies in intelligence and subterfuge. Ours... Well, you know ours. We share a common cause. The mutual benefits of deep cooperation are significant. When they ask, we do not often say no.'

Lochaine paused to let Karras absorb this. Then added, 'Watch Sergeant Kulle was himself assigned to an Inquisition handler. If you have questions, ask him, though there is little he will be able to say openly.'

Karras remained still, letting this new information sink in.

*An Inquisition handler? I don't like the sound of that.*

Ripples rolled across his psychic awareness, not presaging a truly prescient vision, for he did not have that particular gift, but warning him that this was a

matter of great importance, that being assigned to the Ordo Xenos would play a great part in his destiny, for better or worse. It wasn't just a feeling; it had the ring of real knowledge, of undeniable fact.

Lochaine put a hand on Karras's armoured shoulder and urged him to continue walking. Karras fell into step.

'Who is this inquisitor?' Karras asked.

'He has many names.' Lochaine snorted. 'We know him as Lord Arcadius. An alias of course. Some know him as Lord Moldavius. Others as Lord Dromon. None of these are his true name, so far as we can tell. The Inquisition are even more secretive than we are, if you can believe that. The kill-teams already under his command – yes, there are others – know him by his callsign, Sigma.'

Karras was perturbed. He had expected to fight under the auspices of the Watch Commander, or, at the very least, a Watch captain. Space Marines took orders from Space Marines. Anything else was...

'You said this Sigma requested my kill-team specifically?'

'He did.'

'It bothers you, too,' said Karras. 'Something about it bothers you.'

Lochaine kept his eyes on the corridor ahead. Already, a junction could be seen at its end with grand archways leading off in three directions. 'The Ordo Xenos do not think of Space Marines as we do. We see brothers, forged in battle, worthy of respect and honour for the trials we share. We understand each other, even beneath all the diversity and bitter rivalries. At our core, we are the same. They see only assets, an armoured fist to hammer down when things are at their worst, expected to act as commanded and ask no questions. They underestimate us. In this, I see great trouble for you.'

Silence fell, heavy, broken only by the guttering of the flames and the suppressed sound of armoured footfalls.

Shaking off his gloom by force, Lochaine clapped Karras on the shoulder and grinned. 'But not as much trouble as you will cause for them, Death Spectre. I'll take some comfort in that.'

*I won't*, thought Karras dourly.

They had reached the three arches and Lochaine led Karras through the leftmost one into a small antechamber with worn tapestries on two walls and a set of doors cast in polished bronze, embossed with images of Space Marines in battle. Fine work. In the centre of the chamber was a stone font with simple clay cups set on the rim. 'Drink if you wish,' said Lochaine, gesturing at the water in the font. 'Through that door, your kill-team awaits you.'

The water looked cool and refreshing, and had no doubt been sanctified by Qesos or another of the Watch Chaplains, but Karras declined. 'I'll not keep them waiting any longer.'

Lochaine nodded. He strode forwards and pushed open the bronze doors. Then he gestured for Karras to step through ahead of him.

The room beyond was large and circular, the walls dark red, the stone floor black. A domed ceiling hung high above, supported by columns of cream-coloured marble. In the centre of the room was a round table of polished black crystal, surrounded by massive granite chairs.

Figures in black power armour now rose from four of these chairs, leaving their helmets on the table's surface. Just beyond them, on the far side of the table, the hulking angular form of a Dreadnought took two floor-shuddering steps forwards, exhausts venting promethium fumes, engine rumbling, a low growl in a predator's throat.

On seeing Karras, one of the black figures swore loud and harsh.

Karras locked eyes with him, ground his teeth in abject denial, and spun to face Lochaine. 'You have got to be joking, brother,' he hissed at the Storm Warden. 'By the blood of the primarchs, you have *got* to be joking.'

Lochaine walked towards the table, arms splayed, presenting the others.

'Lyandro Karras,' he said, 'meet Talon Squad.'

# DEATHWATCH

ACT III: DEPLOYMENT

*'Fear not death, you who embody it in my name.'*

– The God-Emperor of Mankind, Address at Czenoa, 928.M30

# 1

The sky above Nightside was thick with stars. They glittered like shards of crystal while below them, all was absolute, lifeless black. Chiaro's rimward hemisphere was, on the surface, little more than vast expanses of frozen black rock. If the sun had ever shone here, it was back in the days of the planet's formation, when its axis of rotation wasn't yet pointed straight towards Ienvo, the local star. But that was over a billion years ago. Now, the only photons that ever bounced off this barren land were thrown out by the stars above and, today, by the jets of the three Stormravens that screamed in low over the bed of a large circular crater which the old Mechanicus survey maps called Inorin Majoris.

Above the centre of the crater, the three craft stopped and hung in the freezing air, wing-tip jets blasting downwards, hull nozzles flaring to steady each in position. The second and third hung back while the first adjusted for its drop.

There was a flash from one of the lead craft's under-wing weapons pylons. Something streaked forwards and hit dirt, burying its harpoon-like nose in cold, dead rock. At the tail end of this missile was a pod. It opened like a black flower, spreading steel petals to form a communications relay dish. In the centre of the dish, an antenna emerged, a tiny blue light blinking at its tip. Lower on the pod, a hatch opened, and a small floating object emerged, the size of a human head, trailing a length of thin silvery cable – a communications hard-line.

With its tiny motors throbbing quietly, the head-sized object floated forwards and descended into the black mouth of the shaft in the centre of the crater.

A voice spoke over a vox-link.

‘Reaper One in place. Vox-relay deployed. Opening hatches.’

Four doors levered smoothly open on that first craft – one in either side of the short hull, another in the nose, another below the ship's tail. Zip-lines dropped, snaking off into the deep darkness below. Four shadowy shapes emerged, heavy and heavily armed, only the dull light of their visor slits giving them any detail. They dropped fast on the lines, vanishing quickly into the yawning mouth of the old ventilation shaft that gaped at the crater's centre.

Seconds later, a fifth figure slid from the rear hatch and shot downwards on its line. Slung over its neck and shoulder was a sword.

Moments later, a sharp voice reported, ‘Infil site secured. Ready for Six's

drop.'

'Reaper flight hears you, Alpha. Prepare for delivery.'

The first Stormraven tilted to the left and slid away from the shaft. Reaper Two moved in to take up position.

'Deploying Talon Six,' voxed the pilot.

At the back of the second Stormraven, winches began to whine, spooling out thick, high-tensile, advanced polymer cables. Something big and improbably blocky was lowered into the mouth of the shaft. Impatient growls emanated from within, amplified by the vocaliser grilles on its sloping, thick-armoured front.

Moments later, an irritated bark sounded on the vox-net.

'I'm down.'

'Withdrawing lines,' replied Reaper Two.

Magna-grapples disengaged with a clunk. Cables whipped back up into their reels at speed.

'Reaper Three now moving into position. Dropping mission support package. Stand by.'

A large metal container descended slowly into the darkness beneath. A hundred and twenty metres down, it hit the ground with a clang. One of the dark figures – the shortest and broadest – moved to its door, guided by the glow of its rune panel. Plated fingers tapped in the access code. The door unlocked, jerking forwards a few centimetres as the seals released, then sliding backwards and upwards with an oily, pneumatic hiss. Five gun-servitors rolled out in a line, chest-embedded readouts lighting their grisly faces from below in red. They were ugly things – half machine, half corpse; mind-wiped undead slaves kept alive, so to speak, by nutrifluids and electrical subsystems. Their human arms had been removed at the shoulder, replaced with heavy weaponry fed by the ammo drums riding high on their steel-plated backs. At their waists, their flesh gave way to a chassis with tank-treads in miniature. They chugged and rumbled quietly, and twin trails of greasy exhaust smoke issued from the pipes at their rear. Augmetics sat in place of facial features, their original eyes, nose, lips and tongue having long ago rotted to nothing.

For all their crude appearance, and despite being unable to think beyond basic targeting and threat assessment, they offered solid support in a firefight. They made convenient ammo mules, too.

And they were expendable.

Once the servitors had all emerged, Maximillion Voss went into the container and began hauling out sealed cases. These he lay side-by-side, then tapped a

rune to close the cargo crate's door.

'Talon Four confirms support elements unloaded. Take her up.'

'Understood, Four. Deployment complete. Reaper flight wishes you happy hunting, Talon. See you back here for exfiltration. Reaper One, out.'

The Stormravens' jets flared again as they rose high above the crater. Then, in triangular formation, they swung north and roared off into the darkness, turbines throbbing, until they were too far away to hear. The silence and the stillness of the frozen surface returned. Starlight was all that lit the rocks once more. It was as if the three powerful assault craft had never been there at all.

At the bottom of the shaft, proof of the drop remained: six Deathwatch operatives with a mission and the weaponry to achieve it.

Or so they hoped.

## 2

Karras scanned the broad, circular chamber into which they had descended, his helm optics whirring as they struggled to apply low-light mode to such utter dark. Even a little starlight would have been enough; his upgraded visor technology could have worked with it to make the chamber as bright as a cloudy day, at least to his gene-boasted eyes. But no light reached the bottom of the Inorin vent shaft at all.

‘I can’t see a damned thing in here,’ said Solarion, tapping his helm as if this were a technical problem. ‘I thought they finished the vision mode enhancements before we left the Watch fortress.’

‘They did,’ replied Voss. ‘I watched them do it.’

‘Talon Squad,’ said Karras. ‘I want bolter lights on. Lowest setting. We don’t want to announce ourselves by throwing shadows all over the place.’

Four dim lights winked on. Four only, for neither Voss nor Chyron, the Dreadnought, carried bolters like the others. Voss carried a flamer, but he would not light the blue flame of the igniter until he was in combat. Chyron was armed with a heavy power fist boasting a small under-arm flamer of its own. His main armament, however, was the formidable assault cannon fixed to his chassis’s right shoulder socket.

The rest of the squad gripped bolters that were far from standard, boasting a triple-rail system which allowed for the addition of tactical attachments. On this particular mission, that meant a side-mounted flashlight – now put to use – a small laser range-finder, and an under-barrel grenade launcher, the special rounds for which were stored on the ammunition belts around the Space Marines’ plate-armoured waists. Together with the mounted magnoscope on top of the bolter and a shorter barrel length more suited to Deathwatch operations, the gun almost looked like a different weapon to the one most Space Marines were used to, but in every important way, it was essentially the same.

There was a humming noise in the dark, just above Karras, as the servo-skull that accompanied the kill-team moved forwards on its tiny suspensors. When it was five metres in front of the team leader, it stopped. There was an audible click. Its own light – little more than the power of a small candle – formed a hazy sphere around it. The floating skull rotated, lens-eyes surveying the

chamber just like the eyes of the Space Marines.

It was an equal mix of geometric and natural forms, this dark, echoing place. Human construction, with its straight lines and sharp angles, speared out from mounds of rough, black, ice-encrusted rock. The floor was flat, or rather, almost flat. Centuries of human passage and the grinding wheels of heavy autocarts had worn tracks into the stone. Karras's eyes followed the tracks to a dozen arched tunnel mouths, only a few of which remained completely clear of rubble. The others had suffered some kind of collapse, blocking them up with thick piles of tumbled rock and great iron beams.

'Machinery,' said Voss from off to Karras's left. He stepped close to the nearest piece, a bulky cargo-lifter toppled on its side, one rigid leg sticking out in the air at an angle. It was a big machine, clumsy-looking and crude, almost as large as Chyron but painted yellow where the temperamental Dreadnought was black. 'Preserved by the ice,' said Voss. 'Not even rusted.' He moved closer and peered into its metal guts. 'No power core and no subsystem control boards.'

There was similar detritus all around them. The kill-team's lights played over hills of twisted metal and boxy shapes. Solarion looked at a dark mass of plasteel and cable in front of him, then began walking in a wide circle, half crouching, the beam of his light pointed to the ground. After a minute, he said, 'This place was abandoned years ago, Karras. No recent tracks. No one has been through here.'

'It's dead,' said Zeed.

'Where is the foe, Alpha?' boomed Chyron. 'I wish to kill something, and I wish to kill it now.'

'This is no purge, Six,' said Karras sharply. 'You know that. You'll kill when I give you leave to kill. Not before.'

Chyron rumbled something to himself, then said, 'The sooner the better. We may not have been sent to purify, Librarian, but there *will* be killing. Mark my words. More than enough for all of us.' The Dreadnought pivoted on his mechanical legs, seeming to address Siefer Zeed directly as he said, 'There always is with tyrannids.'

None could mistake the hatred in the Lamerter's voice as he snarled that last word. Did he believe he had found a kindred spirit in the Raven Guard? Certainly, they both hungered for battle, but what Space Marine did not? Even Karras had to acknowledge that part of him which looked forward to the rush, the heightening of senses, the dizzying satisfaction of seeing one's foes cut down.

He glanced up at the servo-skull hovering nearby. Thoughts of glorious battle suddenly dropped away. His brow furrowed beneath his helm. Via the skull's instruments, Sigma could hear all, see all, record all, even take action if need be. To all intents and purposes, that yellowed floating mish-mash of brain, bone and ancient tech *was* Sigma, though the inquisitor's actual physical body remained safely in orbit aboard the *Saint Nevarre*.

Karras thought back to the mission briefing they had attended on that ship, the first and only time they had ever set eyes on the man to whom their solemn Deathwatch oaths had bound them in fate and service.

The briefing room was striking but simple, almost chapel-like with its high arched ceiling some twenty metres above the cold black flagstones of the floor. There were no windows or viewports anywhere, just hydraulic bulkhead doors set in the port and starboard walls. These were so large that the five Space Marines could have walked abreast as they passed under them, if they had wanted to. They were large enough to cause Chyron no trouble. In fact, when the rest of Talon Squad arrived for the briefing, they found the Dreadnought already waiting, his chassis idling with a quiet rumble.

'A tad over-eager, aren't you, Old One?' Zeed jested.

'The inquisitor wished to greet me personally,' boomed the big warrior. 'At least someone on this ship recognises and respects the value of age and experience. Unlike others.'

'I respect you, brother,' replied Zeed. 'I just wish you didn't smoke up the place so much. And you're noisier than a battle tank with a bad axle.'

Chyron growled, but there was no menace behind it. 'One day, little raven, you will be glad to hear that noise. That will be the day Chyron saves your worthless life.'

Zeed laughed aloud. 'I think your own fumes have gone to your head.'

The Lamerter had taken a liking to the Raven Guard. Darrion Rauth and Ignacio Solarion, on the other hand, had not. Solarion threw the long-haired Space Marine a withering glare, wishing he would shut up.

Zeed, as usual, ignored it.

Karras turned on a boot heel and took in the room.

Six weeks. Six weeks aboard the *Saint Nevarre* with no sign of the man who had brought this kill-team together. And now they were in the Ienvo system on their way to the site of their first operation, and the inquisitor had, at last, deigned to call them together. It was the first time any of them had been in the

briefing room.

Only one wall bore any real decoration beyond the regularly spaced alcoves in which bowls of scented oil burned, their orange light dancing, causing the room to pulse and move. That wall was dominated at its base by a semi-circular dais on which sat a tall throne of exquisitely carved skulls in black marble. It was a work of fine craftsmanship, but there was something distinctly odd about it; the seat was sized for a normal man, but the height of that seat, roughly three metres above the uppermost level of the dais, meant that no man could easily place himself on it. Clearly, its height was intended to convey status and authority over those assembled below it. As yet, it remained empty.

Behind the throne, the wall bore a towering relief of a somewhat narrow man in hooded robes flanked by huge Space Marines in an armour design dating back to the dark years of the Heresy and its immediate aftermath. The distinctive staff which the hooded man carried marked his identity clearly: none other than Malcador, known as the Sigillite, founder of the Holy Orders of the Inquisition in days when the Emperor still led the Space Marine Legions he had created.

‘None were trusted more,’ quoted Rauth from behind Karras, ‘Unquestioning he was. And unquestionable his faith.’

‘His body turned to dust on the wind,’ replied Karras, quoting from the same ancient text, Eehto’s *Dreamer Unsleping*. ‘But his will and his sacrifice took form everlasting in the legacy he left all men.’

‘An overrated work,’ said a new, unfamiliar voice. ‘Ibramin Izavius Eehto was born over seven hundred years after the Sigillite’s death and held only mid-level clearance in the Great Librarium. His writings are sensationalist speculation and melodrama. Nothing more.’

The voice was clear and sharp, higher than any Space Marine’s, but somewhat modulated, given an almost artificial quality by the machinery that transmitted it. The words emanated from small vocaliser grilles in the sculpted eye-sockets of the throne’s many skulls. The attention of Talon Squad was drawn to the throne now, for a figure had suddenly appeared there, seated high atop it – a pale, deep-chested, muscular man with a full white beard and piercing blue eyes. He wore black breeches over a bodyglove of black titanium scales, with golden bracers on his forearms and golden greaves on his shins. A red cloak with a high collar hung about his shoulders, fixed there by two silver clasps bearing a heavy skull motif. Between the skulls hung lengths of thick silver brocade. His fingers were spread over the domes of the two black skulls which formed the end of his throne’s armrests.

He looked down at them and smiled, but it was a smile as flat and artificial as his voice.

‘We meet at last, Talon. I am Sigma and I will be your operational commander until the end of your service with the Deathwatch. You will forgive me for not making a personal introduction sooner, but I prefer to hold my briefings only in the relative security of real space.’

‘Then you should have introduced yourself after we boarded at Damaroth,’ said Solarion, indignant as ever. ‘One does not keep Space Marines waiting, inquisitor or otherwise.’

The bearded man’s eyes found him. ‘It suited me better to observe you first, son of Guilliman. A handler ought to know his assets’ personalities and individual capabilities before he deploys them. For your part, however, you need only know your mission parameters. The burden is lighter on your side, is it not?’

A thrumming sound began, building slowly, coming from a wide circular aperture some five metres across, cut in the centre of the floor. The hole had a railing of black plasteel around it. Maximion Voss moved to the railing and looked down into the space below.

‘That’s an impressive hololithic array.’

Three metres below the aperture, a large black hemisphere glittered, its surface pocked with shimmering projection lenses. Even as Voss admired it, a massive three-dimensional object resolved into existence before him, hovering in the air above the hole. It was the icon of the Inquisition rendered at extreme resolution, two metres tall and one across. It looked no less real than anything else in the room.

‘Gather before the projection, Talon,’ said Sigma. ‘It is time you learned some of the details of *Operation Night Harvest*.’

‘Some?’ challenged Karras, but the inquisitor did not answer.

The skull-and-I vanished and was replaced by the strangest planet Karras had ever seen. It looked like an egg laid on its side, its axis of rotation pointed straight at its sun. The tapering sunward hemisphere was bright and riddled with deep volcanic rifts, while the rounded rimward hemisphere was as black as oblivion. Around the planet’s equator, a shadowed gouge extended; a vast canyon spanning the entire circumference of the world.

‘This,’ said Sigma, ‘is the planet Chiaro, a mining world in this very system. A world to which you will soon be deployed.’

He had told them of the intelligence the Ordo had gathered to date, told them

of the ranking agent he had sent and of her sudden disappearance. White Phoenix, he called her. He spoke of the augmetic implant in her head and of the critical intelligence it carried. He talked of duty and loyalty, and of getting her out alive. She had always served the Emperor and the Inquisition well, and now she needed help.

*Night Harvest*, then, was not a kill-mission. It was a tactical rescue and recovery.

Chyron groaned. Zeed shook his head.

Then the inquisitor told them of the nature of the xenos infestation.

*Tyranids.*

That changed Chyron's mood. He flexed his vast metal fists restlessly.

The hololith of the planet disappeared to display a range of sickening xenos forms in unpleasantly sharp detail and colour.

The Dreadnought growled and twitched as he looked at them, seeming on the verge of storming forwards to swipe in murderous hatred at their mere image. It was tyranids, after all, which had all but wiped his Chapter from the face of the galaxy.

Sigma rattled off a series of facts and figures supporting the operation and giving the kill-team estimates on enemy strength. The numbers were staggering. No six-man kill-team should rightly have been sent to face such a force, but again he reminded them that this was, for the first half at least, a stealth operation. They were not to reveal their presence until absolutely necessary. To this end, he ordered that Karras suppress his psychic gifts. His ethereal signature had to be muted almost completely.

The reason was simple: the Ordo believed a powerful tyranid genotype was at the root of all the activity. That genotype was a genestealer broodlord.

None present had ever faced such a creature. Karras had read enough on Damaroth and in the Occludian archives to know such a thing was not to be underestimated. Sigma confirmed that, telling them the creature was the perfect killer, one evolved to be every bit as deadly in ethereal battle as it was in physical.

Were the Deathwatch Space Marines to descend into the mines of Chiaro unshielded by pentagrammic wards, and with Karras's gift unsuppressed, they would be located and assessed immediately, and the entire ravaging horde would be unleashed upon them.

Chyron and Zeed both voiced enthusiasm for that scenario, envisioning a battle that would fill the mines to bursting with xenos dead, but Sigma was harsh

in his reprimand. The recovery of White Phoenix was the objective. Only her successful retrieval would qualify the mission as a success. Anything else would be a disgrace that, he assured them, would stain their names and the honour of their Chapters.

There were questions. Some were answered, and some of those even satisfactorily. But other questions were not. The inquisitor frequently referred to clearance levels and classifications. The kill-team were given only the information they needed. Anything which did not directly contribute to their ability to complete the operation was withheld.

There was tension and anger at this, and in no small amount, but it was tempered by the time they had spent surrounded by secrecy at Damaroth. They were Deathwatch operatives, trained to kill. They longed for combat above all else, a chance to employ the lessons of the Watch sergeants directly against the enemies of mankind. That they would soon be seeing action was foremost in their minds.

With the kill-team finally dismissed, Karras turned to leave with the others. But the pale, bearded man on the high throne called him back.

‘Not you, Alpha. I would have words with you alone.’

So Karras stayed and approached the bottom of the dais, looking up at the strange image of the man above him.

‘We must work together, you and I,’ said Sigma. ‘I know that taking orders from a mortal man will be difficult for you – I have other kill-teams under my command, and it has always been difficult at the beginning – but we need each other. The ancient pact between the Ordo and the Deathwatch has held since the Apocryphon Conclave. We provide the intelligence. You do the killing. The sword cuts better when the eye directs its blows, yes? So I ask you now, will we have a problem?’

Karras hadn’t answered immediately. A lot about the situation on board the *Saint Nevarre* bothered him. The top six decks were permanently Geller-shielded, meaning any astral projection of his consciousness could not breach their walls. Even the ship’s captain, Cashka Redthorne – tall, pretty and keenly intelligent – was denied access despite over a decade in command.

Karras knew the inquisitor resided on those decks, along with the ship’s Navigator and astropaths, but only because he sensed them nowhere else on the ship. He had never encountered such internal security on an Imperial vessel before. Was the inquisitor paranoid? Just what was he afraid of?

‘This,’ said Karras, gesturing up at the body on the throne. ‘This is not you.’

‘If I told you it was,’ said Sigma, ‘would you believe me?’

Karras shook his head. ‘No more than the names you give for yourself.’

‘Good. You are right to doubt. This is mere projection, as you have guessed. My actual appearance, my real name, these are things of no import. Mission data only is what ought to concern you, and on that front you may believe all you see and hear. I want White Phoenix returned to me, Lyandro Karras, no matter her condition. If she cannot be recovered alive, I will settle for her remains, and if not that, then, at the very least, I require the opticom unit implanted in her eye socket. But your highest priority is to bring her back to me. As the leader of this Deathwatch kill-team, and as a Space Marine assigned to my operational command, it is your sworn duty. Members of your team may die in combat to achieve it. I need you to accept that reality now. And I need you to be ready to lay down your own life in order to complete the missions I assign you.’

‘But you will not share the full implications of our operations, nor the data you glean if we are successful.’

‘I will always give you everything you need to get the job done. No more, no less. You may not always agree with my decisions, but you *will* follow them. I have served the Ordo for a very long time, Codicier, and my authority has the backing of Holy Terra herself.’

He would say no more on the matter of disclosure.

It was far from enough, but it changed nothing. Oaths had been taken. Duty must be served.

But Karras wasn’t finished.

‘Answer me this, inquisitor. It was you who selected me for command. It was you who put my kill-team together. I heard talk at Damaroth of irregularities. The members of the Watch Council itself seemed less than sanguine about it. There were almost a hundred battle-brothers to choose from, yet you chose us. Darrion Rauth is the first Exorcist ever to serve the Deathwatch, and he serves now only because you yourself brokered an agreement with the Master of his Chapter. I feel there is great significance in this, something I am missing. I suspect you have prescients in your service, gifted seers who may have told you of potentialities you wish to see fulfilled. If they have sensed prime futures in which I or my kill-team factor, you will tell me about it now. We have a right to know.’

The bearded man smiled that plastic smile again. ‘I cannot fault the logic behind your supposition, Alpha, but the truth is rather more mundane. Your team was selected by virtue of their talents and by the ways in which each might

complement the others. I am aware of the tensions that exist between you now. Time and experience will strengthen your unit cohesion. Like all Space Marines, you will be bonded in battle sooner or later. There is no mystery behind your selection. I simply require the best.'

Karras scowled, certain that this was a lie, but he could not deny the kernel of truth behind it. Lies were always more effective with a little truth mixed in. Throughout the trials on Damaroth, the brothers of Talon Squad had shown themselves to be exemplary specialists. All except Rauth. While the Exorcist was a formidable warrior, his abilities were not as obvious as those of the others. Karras was certain that Rauth had been chosen because he had no discernable soul. Precisely why that was the case still confused him and caused him great concern.

With the silence stretching out between them, it was clear that there was nothing more to be gained from further questions. Sigma had shared all he was willing to share. He dismissed Karras, and the Librarian rejoined the others and the ship's engineers to offer obeisance to their wargear before deployment.

That had been twenty-two hours ago, before final approach, before loading into the Stormravens. Now, here they were, descending into the bowels of a world carved by contrasts.

As Karras followed Solarion just up ahead, he thought back to the inquisitor's words:

*Members of your kill-team may die. Accept that reality now.*

The Death Spectre muttered a curse behind the muzzle of his helm. If he had anything to say about it, none of his Space Marines would be dying down here. Not on his watch. Not for that blasted inquisitor and not for anyone else.

'Talon Squad,' voxed the ugly, skull-faced construct, transmitting the words of Sigma via the surface relay, 'I will now key your tracking systems to the relevant locatrix. This will reveal the position of the primary objective, but not the path to it. There are no records of the natural tunnels beyond the mines. Nevertheless, we will continue to grid-reference *six-delta-six-one*, visible on your retinal displays. From there, I will initiate a special mapping procedure. If this servo-skull is damaged before it reaches that waypoint, the likelihood of mission success will drop to less than one per cent. If we are ambushed or discovered, your first priority is to protect this proxy device. Is that understood?'

Karras blink-clicked inside his helm until the retinal display showed him a three-dimensional representation of the known extents of the Nightside

Underworks. Blink-clicking a few more times isolated the section of the mine they currently occupied. Their present location was a glowing green dot. The waypoint in question was a blinking white one. The quickest route from here to there was also highlighted – a thin line of pulsating white light. In truth, it looked anything but quick, a convoluted series of twists, turns and drops where the original excavators had burrowed in any and every direction, desperate to strike a rich vein of rare and valuable elements. In a word, the layout of the mines was absolutely chaotic.

‘We’ve got it,’ said Karras to the skull. ‘Let’s hope nothing has happened to collapse any of the key tunnels on our route. Stalker rounds only for now, Talon. Let’s try to keep this clean and simple. Solarion, take point. Let me know the moment you see any sign of recent passage.’

‘I hear you, Alpha,’ replied the Ultramarine brusquely.

There was a tinge of acid on that last word, *Alpha*, said to sound almost like a curse. Karras buried an urge to rise to the bait. Would Solarion still covet command so much when the violence began? Sigma hadn’t left them in any doubt at the briefing. They would be staggeringly outnumbered down here once they were compromised, and they *would* be compromised sooner or later. It was inevitable. Once they reached the primary objective, they would kick the nest hard. Everything after that would be a mad run, a fighting retreat back to the exfil point before time ticked out.

‘The rest of you know the pattern for this mission. Chyron, you and one of the gun-servitors, GS8, will hold this chamber secure.’

‘I need no servitor,’ rumbled the Dreadnought.

‘You have blind spots just like the rest of us, Lamentor. The gun-servitor will cover those spots. You may be glad of it. This chamber absolutely must not fall. Is that clear? This is the only feasible exfil point for fifty kilometres in any direction. If we lose this ground—’

‘Just lead them to me, Death Spectre. Do not keep all the killing for yourselves.’

Karras faced the others. ‘I will designate additional rendezvous points as we go. If we have to fall back and you find those RPs compromised, you fight your way here. No matter what happens, brothers, you make sure you are here before the mission chrono runs out. We have less than ten hours. Those Stormravens won’t wait.’

With just under ten hours on the chrono, its readout was green. At five hours that would change to yellow. At two hours, orange.

At thirty minutes, the chrono display would turn red.

‘Are we clear?’ Karras demanded.

Deep, vox-modulated voices answered in the affirmative. The kill-team leader moved them out, and they all bade the Dreadnought what they hoped was a temporary farewell. Solarion, bolter raised to light the way, stalked towards the easternmost tunnel. Sigma’s remote presence followed a metre above and behind, throwing out its own weak, candle-glow illumination.

The rest of the team fell in behind them: Karras first, then Rauth, Voss, and finally Zeed, trailing four of the five gun-servitors in his wake, three of which carried the extra ammunition Voss had secured to their chassis. Strapped to the back of the last gun-servitor was a black case belonging to Sigma. As yet, the inquisitor hadn’t opted to share any information about its contents.

Karras wondered if it was some type of bomb. He had dark thoughts of he and his kill-team getting vaporised down here, unable to escape in time while they battled to break free from a glut of alien bodies. Sometimes, he was glad he didn’t have the gift of true vision. If he’d had, such thoughts may have augured his doom. Better not to know the manner or moment of one’s final, irreversible death until it came to claim you.

Back on Damaroth, Marnus Lochaine had questioned him about his psychic training on Occludus, seemingly surprised that Karras was unable to scry prime futures.

‘My gifts are for the battlefield,’ Karras had told him. ‘I was not blessed with strong prescience like some of my brothers. Since I had little raw talent for it, it was decided early on that my energies would be put to better use on other more combative arts.’

‘I see,’ Lochaine had said. ‘Or perhaps you were not taught to see the future because there are things in it which some do not want you to see.’

The tone, as much as the words themselves, had disturbed Karras at the time. He’d had no response. Lochaine had smiled and waved the comment off, but there had been something in his eyes, and Karras had not liked the look of it.

*If it is a bomb, thought Karras, we’ll just have to make sure we get out of here before it blows. Otherwise Talon Squad will be the shortest lived kill-team in history.*

*And there won’t be anything left of us to send back.*

Chyron watched the lights of his fellows dim and vanish as the tunnel curved away. When they were gone, he turned to look at the gun-servitor which

remained beside him.

It stood quite still, engine chugging in a soft imitation of Chyron's own. With weapon primed and raised, it scanned the mouths of the chamber exits for sign of enemy movement.

Chyron sighed in his metal sarcophagus. There would be no slaughter here. It was the others that would see bloodshed this day, not he. Of that, he was almost certain. He wished he could go with them, wished he still had a Space Marine body, more than just a brain and organs stuffed into a nutrifluid tank. His chassis was too big for the tunnels. This would be no hunt. The enemy would have to come to him.

With nothing but a mindless servitor for company, and quiet inky darkness all around him, he turned his mind to the glories of the past, and cursed the fate that had left him alive when the rest of his Chapter had died.

Often during times like these, with little to do but await the vengeful slaughter he longed for, his thoughts would turn to death. A part of him, the most self-indulgent part, longed for it. He might have died with honour and glory countless times, but his fate had always been that of the survivor. Even at his worst, lying in red pieces on a blood-sodden moor while the carrion birds tugged at his entrails, death all but certain to claim him, fate had intervened, denying him the peace of oblivion. He was found, lauded as a great hero, and locked into this life-sustaining metal casket to fight on. Pride was one thing, but it had its limits. Let a violent end claim him, take him away to stand with the souls of his lost brothers. He hungered for it, but he would not speed its coming. He had long ago sworn his life, however long, to the service of the Emperor. Even so, centuries had come and gone. Just how much more would the Emperor demand of that oath?

To himself, Chyron rumbled, 'Perhaps today, I will find a worthy doom. Maybe today I shall be granted the release for which I long. Let them come for me, a great tide of them, clamouring for my destruction. Let us die together, the music of their final bestial screams carrying me to the other side, to the brothers that await me. A violent, bloody end. By the red tears of Sanguinius himself, let it be so.'

The servitor beside him twitched a little on hearing the words, and Chyron half imagined it was about to concur. But servitors could not do that. Perhaps part of the wretch's memory-wiped brain felt an impulse to speak in response. Perhaps the Dreadnought's words echoed its own desperate wish.

No. It was just a servitor – no longer a man with words and thoughts of its

own.

*Nevertheless, we are both denied death for the service we might render,* thought Chyron as he looked down at the pallid, socket-covered head of the man-machine.

His sense of pride rose up then, and rebelled against this growing malaise. He felt anger at himself. What was he doing, comparing himself to a servitor? How could he allow such weakness, such self-doubt? They were nothing alike. He, Chyron, was a Lamerter, a mighty battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes. He had not been made a Dreadnought because he was weak, nor had he committed some crime of heresy or treachery like the man this servitor had once been. Chyron endured because he was strong, resilient, indomitable, relentless. His was a life worth extending, no matter the price, no matter the suffering and the loneliness and the interminable survivor guilt. The Imperium still needed him. The Deathwatch needed him. This upstart Librarian, Karras, and his Talon Squad... They would need him, too, before the day was out.

While filthy xenos still threatened everything his Chapter had ever fought and died to protect, he would go on, his bloodlust insatiable.

One day, when the time was right, death would bring an end to duty.

Let the Emperor decide that day, not he, and not some filthy xenos abomination.

Deep in such thoughts, he walked the chamber's perimeter, chassis lamp lighting his way, his concussive, piston-powered footfalls shaking tiny fragments of ice from the ceiling and the walls.

The old mineworks sensed him, heard him, listened to his restless rumblings as it breathed slow icy breaths, waiting for the maelstrom of violence and slaughter that was to come.

### 3

Karras was glad of the automapping upgrade the tech-magi had installed in his battle-helm. For the last half-hour, the endless tunnels had blended together until they were all but indistinguishable, an almighty mass of looping, sloping passageways; the frozen, lifeless intestines of Nightside. Talon Squad had come across no signs of recent activity, no animal carcasses, not even so much as a patch of lichen or fungus.

It was too cold and desolate for much life to exist here, but none at all? In times past, Karras knew, it had been different. The Chiaro dossier had listed several large indigenous life forms as potential threats. So far, however, nothing stirred.

He thought of the miners that had once walked these very paths before the local veins dried up. It was not, he guessed, a life any would choose given other options. A malfunctioning thermasuit was a death sentence, as were loss of lighting, cave-ins, gas-pockets and a dozen other common hazards. Then again, the baking heat, deadly radiation and regular seismic activity of Dayside was hardly any better.

Up ahead, Solarion angled right, following the gradual bend and downward slope of the path they trod. Even a Space Marine, his memory flawless, would have struggled with this maze of rough-hewn roads and abandoned machine-cut chambers. Some of the tunnels lacked the telltale signs of human creation. They had not been melted or blasted out, though they bore support stanchions and plasteel safety doors like all the man-made sections. The walls in some of these natural tunnels were almost mirror-smooth, seeming to curve to the contours of a massive tubular body. These, Karras guessed, were the work of rock-eaters – oversized vermians listed as extinct.

Only their massive blade-like teeth and rings of body segment armour had ever been found, formed of a black material as hard as diamond, yet entirely organic according to Mechanicus Biologis reports. No other physical remains had been discovered in all the planet's centuries of human occupation, and no live specimen had ever been recorded. A part of Karras hoped the giant worms *were* extinct. His team didn't need any extra complications.

Men had exploited the legacy of the rock-eaters. From their earliest days on

Chiaro, they had incorporated the creatures' tunnels as part of the mines, branching their own efforts out from them in search of priceless ores.

Karras turned the bend ahead and caught sight of Solarion again.

There was a crackle on the vox. Up ahead, the quality of the light changed. Around Solarion, it no longer shimmered on the ice-rimed tunnel walls.

'I've entered the next chamber,' said the Ultramarine. 'No contacts.'

'Move left, stop at ten metres and wait for orders,' replied Karras. 'We'll do a proper sweep before I decide whether or not this is an appropriate site for an RP.'

'Understood,' Solarion grunted.

Karras emerged into the chamber now, and, with the boosted, green-hued image his optical enhancements provided, saw it to be a vast polygonal hall, its walls cut from pure rock without need of artificial supports. Eight dark archways had been machine-cut into the walls, including the one through which the kill-team had come, leading off down inky tunnels in every compass direction. The ceiling above had been left rough and natural, covered in sharp stalactites that hung like black fangs waiting to bite down on them. Around the perimeter, however, there were several metal stairways reaching to smaller man-made tunnel mouths. Between some of these hung plasteel gantries and platforms. The immediate impression of the entire chamber was that people not only worked here, they had lived here.

*A natural cavern the first miners exploited, thought Karras. I don't like all those exits. Too many angles to cover. On the other hand, there are some good bottlenecks at ground level and enough room to stay mobile during a firefight.*

In ordered rows on the cavern floor, there were several dozen prefab huts and cabins – some quite large, all with flat roofs – along with a number of raised platforms the purpose of which it was no longer possible to guess. Perhaps there had once been a small first-stage refinery operating here. Pipes and ducts crisscrossed large sections of the walls. Huge circular extractors hung silent and motionless in the gloom overhead. An old autocart, its basic cabin-and-flatbed design some eight metres long, lay to the far right in perfect condition, broad wheels frozen stiff to the chamber floor. Whatever purpose this place had once served, from now until the end of this particular mission, it would function as the first of the kill-team's emergency rendezvous points. Karras was satisfied that, despite its shortcomings, it offered a good place to turn and engage pursuing enemy forces without getting locked down.

The others filtered into the chamber now, breaking its long-lived, icy tranquillity. Following Karras's commands, they arranged themselves in a broad

line along the chamber's western edge. Four gun-servitors rolled in after them, chugging and shuddering on their compact iron treads.

Karras ordered a sweep. Within minutes, the chamber was proclaimed clear.

Nothing. Not even recent tracks. It was as lifeless as the tunnels that had brought them. The squad gathered in the centre of the chamber and Karras addressed them.

'I'm designating this RP1. It's the closest large chamber with a direct access route to our exfil point. Omni, I want an ammo cache set up on one of the central roofs, one with easy access. A full third of what we have. By the time we return here, we'll have plenty of company.'

'I could rig the chamber for structural collapse, Scholar,' said Voss, 'but it will leave us light on charges.'

Karras thought it over. He looked at the walls, the ceiling. Rigging it all to come down on a pursuing enemy force might make all the difference once things got out of hand, but it didn't look like an ideal place to lay that kind of contingency measure.

*No pillars. All the weight is held by the walls. And just how thick are they?*

'No. Save them, Omni. There will be more viable options up ahead.'

The inquisitor's servo-skull moved off, drifting towards the thick adamantium plates of an emergency blast door approximately four metres across – a door that was firmly closed. There were many such doors in the more developed sections of the mines, intended to protect men and equipment from gas explosions or other deadly accidents.

'Beyond this door is the way forwards,' said Sigma.

The little skull moved sideways and hovered by a control panel to the left. A tiny mechanical arm extended from its undercarriage and began prodding a runeboard.

Nothing.

Karras walked over to the same control panel and leaned in to study a small aperture in the wall.

'There's no power. Most of the circuits have been stripped out. We'll have to open it manually,' he told the others. 'Two, Three and Five, help me with this.'

There was a glass window behind which Karras could see a handle with yellow and black diagonal stripes. He punched the glass and pulled it. From the middle of each door, a long, thick bar swung out.

'Zeed, Rauth, you take the far one. Solarion and I will take this one.'

With two Space Marines to each door, and with their weapons mag-locked to

their thigh plates, they began trying to haul the doors open, but even with superhuman musculature and all the additional strength conferred by their power armour, it was incredibly heavy going. After a minute of straining and swearing, the doors had shifted only half a metre apart.

Voss had finished setting up the ammo cache. He stood watching them for a moment, grinning under his helm. 'You are all pathetic,' he joked. 'My old serf could do better. Prophet, go pull with the others. I'll work this side with Scholar.'

'I've warned you about calling me that,' said Solarion.

'All right, brother, just get over there and start pulling, will you?'

Voss joined Karras on the handle of the left door. He settled into position, gauntleted hands gripping the bar, ready to exert his significant strength. 'Now you'll see something.'

Together with Karras, he heaved, throwing all his power into it, pulling hard with the broad, thick muscles of his unfeasibly wide back. The metal of the door groaned in protest, but it started moving. Within a matter of seconds, the gap had widened from half a metre to two-and-a-half, and most of that was on the left side. There was no need for further effort. They could proceed.

'Don't all thank me at once,' said Voss as the team filtered through into the dark tunnel beyond.

'I can see it now,' said Zeed, 'Maximmion Voss, Imperial Fist, Captain of the Third Company, Master of Doors. Think of the banner iconography. Glorious.'

Even Solarion failed to stifle a snorted laugh.

Rauth and Sigma, however, were silent. Karras noted it and it robbed him of his own grin.

'Stay vigilant, Talon,' he voxed. 'This is enemy ground. Solarion, lead on.'

‘Alpha. You had better come up here.’

It was the voice of Solarion, tinged with static. Increasing amounts of soledite dust on the icy air were starting to tell on vox-comms the deeper Talon Squad descended. Karras raised a gauntleted fist, signalling those behind him to hold position, then he moved forwards down the tunnel to where he could see the Ultramarine’s broad silhouette. Drawing up alongside him, Karras didn’t need to ask why Talon’s point-man had stopped. The tunnel ended abruptly in a mass of fallen rock.

‘I saw this coming. This is recent, Karras.’

‘Deliberate?’

‘No tracks,’ said Solarion. ‘No explosive residue on the air. From this side, it looks natural, but I can’t be sure.’

Karras was silent as he mulled that over. Was it conceivable that someone or something had known they were coming? Between this and the emergency blast door with the missing power core, it was starting to look like a definite possibility. Conventional stealth was one thing – though dropping a multi-tonne monstrosity like Chyron down a hundred-metre vent shaft was far from stealthy – but a psyker of strong ability with his mind turned to the right place at the right time could certainly have detected the arrival of unfamiliar spiritual signatures, even though Karras had suppressed the strength and brightness of his own. But why would another psyker be focused on the Inorin shaft unless... Could it be that the enemy had a true seer among them, one who could glimpse prime futures?

Karras wished he could free his own talents then, if even for a moment only. He might have sent his astral self out at the speed of thought to scour the darkness ahead for such a foe. But, again, Sigma had been emphatic. Without the suppression, this time self-regulated, of Karras’s ethereal presence, the enemy leader would sense him in an instant and send his lethal children out en masse to rip them apart. A true seer, however, with genuine prescient ability, could have perceived months, even years ago, that the kill-team would be coming this way. If this cave-in was a response to such a vision then, for all the psychic damping, the pentagrammic wards tattooed on their flesh, the photo-reactive cells on their

black armour and the low-light discipline they employed, Talon Squad might well have been compromised already.

Without employing his power, there was no way to be sure.

‘Alpha to squad. It’s possible that we are being herded into ambush. Stay sharp, brothers. I’ll not have them get the drop on us.’

‘There’s a way around,’ said Solarion. ‘Check the automapper. See that junction three sections back? We can take the south-east tunnel. It’s small and cramped, and not as direct, but it will get us to the waypoint.’

‘We will lose an additional twenty minutes,’ said Karras, ‘and we’re already running out the chrono. But you’re right, brother. That’s our only option.’

Karras turned to look at the servo-skull a few metres behind him. Did Sigma have nothing to say? Apparently not. Someone else did, however.

‘They underestimate us,’ said a hard, almost toneless voice over the link. ‘Whatever advantage they think they have, it will not be enough. We are Deathwatch and we encompass their doom. Lead us on, Alpha, ambush or no, and let us prove it to them.’

It was the Exorcist, and he had just addressed Karras directly for the first time since the drop. That in itself was hardly surprising. Karras and the others had soon discovered during training at Damaroth that the Exorcist was a man of very few words, and half of those were obscure literary quotes only Karras ever seemed to recognise.

Rauth’s words hung in the air between the five armoured warriors. The kill-team leader could almost feel a tremor of battle-hunger wash over him. He guessed the others felt it, too, but since his talent had to remain suppressed, it could only be a guess.

‘Watcher’s right,’ said Zeed. ‘Let them try their ambush. I welcome it.’

On hearing the nickname, Rauth tensed. *Watcher*. It had been given to him because Rauth, for reasons unknown to anyone but himself, rarely took his eyes off the kill-team leader. Even back at Damaroth, this had been true. Since the moment of their meeting in the Refectorium that day, there had been a strange charge in the air between the two Space Marines. Karras had confronted the Exorcist, asking more than once if there was a problem, something he wished to discuss in private. But the Exorcist never answered. It was as if he was waiting for something, and not something positive, judging by his mien. But Karras could not begin to guess what it might be. With no recourse, he had pushed the matter aside, though he was ever aware that Rauth continued to watch him.

Zeed meant no real offence. There was a spirit of camaraderie behind the

giving and the usage of the nicknames, but Rauth and Solarion were both a lot less inclined than their fellows to accept theirs.

Karras didn't have time to arbitrate. 'Solarion,' he said, 'lead us back to the junction. But let's keep the pace up. Any more dead-ends will cost us time we can ill afford to spare.'

The Ultramarine moved past Karras without a word.

The rest of the squad fell in behind, with the servitors and Sigma's floating skull in tow. They moved faster than before, conscious that doubling back was costing seconds they could ill afford. Despite their haste, they kept their senses razor-keen for any sign of hostile contact up ahead.

*So many 'if's, thought Karras. And these tunnels are riddled with blind-siding opportunities. If they have a prescient, we're walking right into their game. Why in the name of the Emperor are we really down here, Sigma? I don't believe this is about your loyalty to your people. Critical intel, maybe, but I suspect there's more to it than that.*

*What is it about this White Phoenix that you're not telling us?*

## 5

The Space Marines had to hunch over as they traversed the side tunnel that led away from the junction Solarion had mentioned as their only alternative. All but Voss, that is, so much shorter than the others. As they moved along the cramped passageway, pauldrons occasionally scraping on the cold black rock, Zeed half turned to the stocky Imperial Fist.

‘At long last, Omni, being so short proves advantageous.’

Voss snorted. ‘Do me a favour, paper-face. Take your helmet off. We need more light in here, and you practically glow in the dark.’

The Raven Guard laughed.

‘Kill it, you two,’ barked Karras from up ahead. ‘Talon Three, you should be seeing the next junction.’

‘Moving out into it now,’ voxed Solarion.

Karras felt something – a tremor, slight at first, but building rapidly. A rain of dust broke the beam of his rail-mounted flashlight.

‘Move now,’ he snapped at his squad. ‘Get to that junction.’

With the exception of Solarion, who was already far up ahead, the rest of the kill-team broke into a crouching run. The tremor got stronger and stronger. A rain of rock and dirt began drumming on helms and pauldrons.

‘Seismic?’ asked Zeed as he made haste.

‘Blood and blazes,’ cursed Karras as he ran. ‘If I didn’t have to suppress my power, I’d know what is happening here.’

‘And the enemy leader would perceive you at once,’ crackled the inquisitor’s voice, relayed through the comms module in the servo-skull’s small metal undercarriage. ‘The psy-suppression order stands until I say otherwise. The success of this mission depends on it.’

Karras broke from the tunnel and saw Solarion, his back towards him, bolter raised to cover the three tunnel mouths on the other side of a small natural chamber.

‘It’s still getting stronger,’ gasped Voss as he barrelled out behind Karras. ‘What in Dorn’s name...’

Rauth and Zeed followed, the servo-skull swooping out between them, still trailing its communications lifeline. Last of all came the gun servitors, rolling

forwards swiftly on their tracks. Three of them made it out. The last was struck on the skull by a falling rock the size of a power fist. The man-machine's head was smashed, the left hemisphere of its brain pulped to a grisly jelly. Milky nutrifluids pumped out over its neck and shoulders. Then more rocks fell. Just as the servitor's treads were about to take it beyond the lip of the tunnel, it was buried in a rush of heavy black stone.

'By the Spire, that was close,' breathed Zeed, closest of the kill-team to the tunnel mouth that was now, suddenly, just another wall of rock.

Karras checked the servo-skull's communications hard-line and saw that it extended back into the fresh rubble. 'Sigma, are you still with us?'

'Still with you, Alpha,' crackled the inquisitor's voice. 'The hard-line has not been severed. We have comms. Now start clearing this away. The servitor's body must be recovered.'

'That's a negative,' Karras replied. 'We've just had our primary exfil path blocked and the mission-chrono is not on our side. We're not digging out a non-operational servitor. Talon Squad—'

'That servitor was carrying a hexagraphe,' interrupted Sigma. 'Do you know what that is? Because without it, this mission is already over, and the implications for you and your team, Death Spectre, are dire indeed.'

Karras had seen a number of obscure references to hexagraphes in his reading back at Watch Fortress Damaroth. There were several vague mentions of their use, mostly in connection with defensive operations launched against the despised eldar. For a second, he was furious. If the device was so critical to the mission, they should have been issued two – a primary and a back-up – and the Space Marines themselves should have been tasked with carrying them.

But Karras had no idea just how rare or dangerous they were. Did the Ordo Xenos even *have* two?

He glanced over at the three remaining gun-servitors. They would be of no help here. Their upper limbs had been replaced with shoulder-grafted weaponry. It was down to Talon to get their hands dirty.

'Right, brothers,' said Karras. 'Let's dig the damned thing out.'

'I don't think so,' replied Solarion.

Maximmion Voss ignored him, pushed past the others, grabbed the biggest rock as if it weighed nothing, and flung it off to his left where it smashed into a score of smaller pieces.

Resignedly, Zeed and Rauth pitched in seconds later.

Karras stared at Solarion for a moment longer, considering a direct command

but certain it would lead to a confrontation he didn't need right now. He left it and began removing debris with the others. A few seconds later, Solarion joined them with only a mumbled curse. Soon, the five Deathwatch Space Marines stood in a half-circle staring down at the mangled form of the permanently offlined gun-servitor.

'Messy,' said Zeed, 'but two of the ammo boxes are still intact.'

He crouched over the ruined man-machine and lifted the grey boxes from the battered metal chassis.

There was a smooth black container strapped to the servitor's broken back. It, like the two ammo boxes, was dented and scraped, but had suffered no more damage than that. The servitor's white body fluids were splashed along one side of it.

'The hexagraphe?' asked Voss.

Sigma's servo-skull drifted over, anti-gravitic motors buzzing, like a fat beetle on the wing.

'Detach it from the body,' he commanded, 'but do not open it. We must not deploy it here, because the moment we do, every psychic eye on this planet will be turned to your location. I say again, keep it sealed.'

'We heard you,' said Voss as he bent and unclasped the container from the pale and twisted torso.

'Strap it to another of the servitors,' Sigma ordered. 'And keep that servitor between you. This operation cannot afford a repeat of what just happened here.'

'If you had told us in the first place,' Zeed countered.

The skull whirled to face him.

'As your Alpha has already pointed out, the mission-chrono is ticking. I suggest you proceed.'

'Solarion,' said Karras. He needed no more words than that.

The Ultramarine had already turned and was walking off towards the tunnel mouth they must enter next. He disappeared into it, his light shimmering on the walls. But the quality of that light had changed again, and Karras noted it. The air wasn't quite as crisp now. He checked his external temperature readout.

*It's getting warmer. We're going deeper and it's getting warmer.*

According to the automapper projection on his retinal display, they were soon to cross into uncharted territory. It would not be long before they'd have to use the hexagraphe.

*And if what Sigma says is correct, the moment we do, it will bring the onslaught right down on top of us.*

He hefted his bolter in his hands, comforted by the weapon's reassuring weight, and followed Solarion into the tunnel mouth.

*So be it*, he thought, gripping the weapon firmly. *It's about time we got to the real business.*

Perhaps the force sword *Arquemann*, sheathed and slung over his left pauldron, felt the same way. Karras couldn't tell. While he kept his inner gates closed to the flow of his power, he was cut off from perceiving the blade's mood.

*Be patient, thirsty one*, he told the blade regardless. *The killing will come.*

And when it did come, it would hit them all like a perfect storm. One they'd be lucky to survive.

## 6

Four hours in, and these were no longer the same mines they had entered. Not any more. Signs of human exploitation were non-existent. There were no more support beams or thick plasteel safety doors. No tools had worked these walls. No ore had been pulled from these deep rocks to be taken to the refineries above. These were the planet's natural caves and lava tunnels, at least for the most part. Criss-crossing them at every angle were the passages cut by the diamond-hard teeth of the leviathan rock-eaters.

Karras couldn't shake the feeling that the earlier quake had not been the result of simple tectonics. Was it possible that some of the rock-eaters had survived down here, undiscovered? Or had the quake been caused by something much, much worse?

It was lighter here. Karras studied the nearest wall. Patches of bioluminescent growth dotted the rock. He reached out and touched one. It was about a centimetre deep at the middle, springy but quite dry. The moment he touched it, patterns of colour rippled across it, and a faint puff of powder rose into the air. His helmet sensors warned him of a mild cytotoxin in that dust, mixed with a trace of hallucinogen – a defence mechanism.

Sigma had urged them beyond the extents of the map projected by their retinal displays. Karras noted the moment on his automapper when the blips indicating his kill-team left the glowing loops of digital tunnels and chambers behind and moved into dark, empty space. They would, Sigma insisted, continue in the general direction of the prime objective until they came to a suitable location from which to deploy the hexagraphe. That meant the next tunnel intersection because, as things stood now, there was no other way to discern the proper path until the strange device was put to use.

'Turn off your lights,' Karras told the others as he thumbed off his own. 'These organisms on the walls provide more than enough illumination for low-light vision mode.'

Voss stopped to study one and noted the same ripple of light and defensive toxin release. 'Interesting reaction. Quite an aggressive response. If this were analysed, I'd wager we'd find tyranid DNA.'

Zeed was unimpressed. 'I didn't come here to fight moss. Five hours in and no

hard contact. How sure are we of a xenos infestation? We've seen nothing. How good is your intelligence, Sigma? Because, so far, it looks like no one is home.'

The servo-skull, or rather its operator, ignored him. Still trailing its comms hard-line all the way back to the relay by the Inorin vent, the proxy device continued to move relative to Solarion's position as the Ultramarine stayed on point up ahead.

Whether tyrannid organism or not, the moss-like patches cast everything in an eerie bluish glow, not unlike the moon of Damaroth, only nowhere near as bright. In fact, there was something about the quality of light and air here, the tone of the scene, that cast Karras's mind back to his times struggling against the Black River. Perhaps it was the sense of being channelled towards something unknown. Perhaps it was just the sense of confinement with only forward motion possible. Whichever was true, the memories and the sensations they brought with them were unwelcome. Fortunately, they were soon broken by the dry, crackling tones of Sigma speaking through his fleshless floating remote.

'This will suffice, Talon. We will deploy the hexagraphe here.'

Up ahead, Solarion and the floating skull had emerged from the end of the current passage. Karras stopped beside them, finding himself on a broad ledge before a sheer, craggy drop that plunged about thirty metres into a strange glowing pool. Looking over the edge, he noticed masses of crystal below the waters, shimmering in pale hues of blue and green. The water itself was perfectly still.

The rest of the kill-team and their three remaining gun-servitors emerged onto the ledge. Voss whistled as he gazed around the massive cavern. 'Impressive. It reminds me of the caverns on Valaxos. Minus all the dead and dying, of course.'

'Sigma,' said Karras. 'That water looks like it's heavily infused with margonite.'

'It should not be a problem. If there is any effect, it will only be to boost the strength of the device's charge. Think of a psychic hood. It is the margonite folded into the metals which resonates with the gifts of the wearer. We think this is why the broodlord opted to nest so deep in the tunnels. The margonite may be magnifying its powers. The miners had already stripped the upper levels. Regardless, the hexagraphe will work. Take it to the centre of this chamber and extract it from its carrying case.'

The ledge they were on followed the curving cavern wall a short distance to the left, then branched out into the middle of the chamber, forming a natural bridge across the glowing lake below. In the approximate centre, beneath a

ceiling dense with stalactites, that bridge split into four sections, each leading off to a different part of the cavern walls. Three of those narrow spans led to dark hollows, like the gaping mouths of dead men. It was down one of these that Talon's primary objective lay. But which?

'G-17,' voxed Karras. 'Come forwards.'

One of the servitors trundled out from behind the others and rolled over to stop in front of the kill-team leader. Karras looked at the servitor's white-fleshed face, lens-eyed and steel-jawed. Its papery skin was the same colour as his own, though for entirely different reasons.

'Turn,' he told the man-machine.

Obediently, the servitor rotated on its treads, presenting its back.

Karras stepped in and removed the case containing the inquisitor's hexagraphe.

'Return to your place in line,' he told the servitor. Wordlessly, it obeyed.

Rauth, Zeed and Solarion kept their weapons raised and their attention on the tunnel entrances. Voss, however, joined Karras to watch him extract the device. His flamer lacked the range to cover the far side of the chamber, and he was curious to see what marvel of technology was so critical to the success of the operation.

Sigma's servo-skull descended to hover a metre over the black case. There was a high-pitched screech from the skull's vox-grille – a pulse-burst code – and the case hissed open, releasing its hydraulic seals. The lid swung up slowly on small pistons. The inner walls of the box were intricately carved with ancient and baroque symbols, only a few of which Karras had ever seen in all his many decades of reading and dedicated study.

*Hexagrammic and pentagrammic wards, he thought. But different from the ones with which we Space Marines are tattooed and branded.*

He wondered at their origin, probably lost long ago in the mists of time, as was so much mankind had once known and had taken for granted. To Karras, the loss of knowledge always seemed particularly tragic.

The device itself sat in a circular depression in the centre of the box and was remarkably unassuming at first glance. A perfect sphere, little bigger than a child's skull, flawlessly smooth and absolutely black. It seemed that such a thing ought to reflect light, but, much like the anti-specular resins used on Deathwatch armour, it did not. In fact, like their armour, it appeared to absorb it. At a casual glance, it might have been mistaken for a hole in space rather than a solid object, but solid it was, for around its middle was a band of ancient lettering, the script

extremely fine and gold in colour.

Solarion, standing a metre to Karras's left, glanced over. 'Eldar! I've seen enough runes like that in my time!'

Voss stiffened and spun to regard the inquisitor's floating yellow proxy. 'Is this how the Ordo Xenos conducts its operations? By trusting Space Marine lives to the enemy's tainted artefacts?'

The servo-skull turned its hollow sockets on the Imperial Fist.

'A disappointing and predictable response from a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes, but one I had not expected from you, Talon Four. I had thought your affinity with technology would have taught you the value of looking beyond the source. Put your distaste aside in the name of expedience. This device is our only hope of mapping the tunnels beyond this point and selecting a route to the primary objective. There is no alternative, alien or otherwise.' To Karras, he continued, 'The Ordo has secured a number of hexagraphes over the millennia, and we have spent significant time and resources in their study. Our understanding is, if not complete, at least practical and applicable. We have employed them in the field before with success. We employ this one now, for there is no other way you can complete your mission in the time remaining.'

'The woman is surely dead already,' Zeed protested. 'Forget accursed eldar orbs and all this stealth. Reclassify this as a purge and let me loose. I have genestealers to kill.'

The skull faced him. 'When will you listen, Raven Guard? It is no mere genestealer that rules these depths. The broodlord is a foe beyond even your capabilities and, if you engage it directly, you will not survive. Whether my agent is alive or dead, you are to avoid contact with the broodlord. Do not seek it out. Do not stand your ground when it comes for you. This is no hunt to satisfy your ego and your bloodlust.'

'White Phoenix,' said Zeed. 'Just what is her strategic value? Why are the lives of Space Marines being gambled on her recovery?'

'No more questions,' said Sigma. 'You will proceed as ordered. The scalpel does not ask the surgeon why it cuts.'

That was too much for Zeed. Pride and anger erupted, crashing over his usual good humour and self-control. He moved in a blur, intent on striking down the servo-skull, obliterating it. With little more than a flinch, he covered two metres, but there he stopped, suddenly and abruptly. Karras heard him roar beneath his helm. It was followed by a furious torrent of invective. He realised Zeed was struggling against his own ceramite shell. His greatest asset had been turned

against him at the speed of thought.

‘Armour lock,’ said Sigma coldly. ‘Consider it an insurance policy against just such folly as this. Should any of you act to compromise the mission, I can and will disable you.’

The servo-skull rose another metre into the air and turned to face Karras.

‘In attempting to damage this proxy, Talon Five has acted against the best interests of the kill-team and this operation. If you cannot elicit proper discipline from your people, Alpha, I will.’

‘This is an outrage,’ rumbled Voss deep in his throat, stepping forwards to glare at the hovering skull. ‘One does not—’

‘I agree,’ hissed Solarion, cutting him off. ‘The Inquisition oversteps the mark. Do not ever utilise this on me, Sigma, I’m warning you now.’

‘All of you, listen well,’ Sigma snapped at them. ‘The Ordo Xenos respects the Adeptus Astartes more, perhaps, than any other body in the Imperium. We know your value. We know what you can do. That respect comes from a long and fruitful cooperation. It is I who selected you, I who respects you most. But the war my Ordo wages is unlike any you have known. Nothing is ever as it seems. Taint and corruption are everywhere. The Imperium is besieged on all sides and in ways you cannot yet imagine. I need your capabilities to help me win that war. What am I to do if you will not listen to orders? Armour lock is a regrettable necessity. It gives me no pleasure to employ it, and I will do so only when pressed. Put your pride aside, work *with* me, and I shall not have to. Siefer Zeed, had I let you strike this servo-skull, you would have ended the mission right here. How many millions would die needlessly then because the Inquisition did not get the critical intelligence it sought? And how much suffering would White Phoenix have endured for nothing? Think on it.’

There was silence, heavy with angst.

‘You should have told me,’ said Karras at last. ‘We should not have found out like this.’ He turned to Zeed. ‘Your word, Ghost. Recall your oath. Give me your word. I need you back on mission.’

‘He pushes us too far, Scholar,’ grated the Raven Guard. ‘We are scions of the Emperor.’

‘And in His name, we took our oath and accepted our secondment. I’ll have your word, Ghost,’ Karras insisted.

The moment stretched out. At last, gruffly, Zeed answered. ‘You have my word, Scholar. I’m back on mission. But it’s not the end of this. The Raven Guard are puppets to no one. You speak of cooperation, Sigma. That does *not*

mean unilateral control.'

Karras stepped in close and faced Zeed, visor-to-visor. 'While we are Deathwatch, we are assigned to the Ordo, and Sigma has operational command. But I'm the kill-team leader, Ghost. Look at me. I'm Alpha here. I have tactical command. Take orders from me, for your Chapter's honour, if nothing else.'

Zeed tried to nod, but he couldn't. He couldn't even move a finger.

'I gave my word, Scholar.' His voice was low, the heat of his rage bleeding. 'It will stand.'

'Sigma,' said Karras turning. 'Unlock him. We don't have time for this.'

'No,' replied Sigma pointedly, 'we do not'.

There was a sharp burst of high-frequency noise from the servo-skull. Zeed's armour unfroze. He flexed his plated limbs and rolled his shoulders, cursing quietly under his helm.

*Be patient, brother,* thought Karras. *Let this play out for now. We are bound by oath to do our duty, but this cannot stand. Once we return to the Saint Nevarre...*

With the situation now defused, at least for the moment, Sigma's proxy drifted back down towards the case containing the hexagraphe, ignoring the glares of the giants surrounding it.

Over the link, the inquisitor addressed Karras. 'Alpha, listen closely. It is almost time to unshackle your power. The hexagraphe requires your gifts in order to function. It is a machine designed for a psyker's use. You understand what this means, yes? The broodlord will sense you and send its mind to seek you out. You will feel it watching you, studying, evaluating. The horde will come down on you shortly after. That is unfortunate, but inevitable. We have come as far as we can unnoticed.'

'Just tell me what to do,' Karras demanded.

'Pick it up and hold it out in front of you.'

Fixing his bolter to the mag-lock on his right cuisse, Karras did so. The sphere looked so innocuous in his hand. Did it really warrant so much caution?

'Now release the lock on your power. Let the eldritch energies of the empyrean flow back into you and through you.'

Karras was only too happy to do that. As he felt the swell of ethereal energy within him, he saw the auras around him brighten, and felt *Arquemann's* soul linking with his once more, the force sword as anxious for battle as the rest of the kill-team.

'With your gift,' said Sigma, 'raise the orb into the air and push it out into the centre of the cavern. There! Hold it there. Good. Now listen carefully. Focus

your mind on the hexagraphe as if it were a foe. Attack it with your witchfire. Attempt to destroy it.'

'How will my destroying it help us?'

'You won't. It will absorb the energy and utilise it. You will see. But be ready. Once the energy is sufficient, the device will detonate. The moment it does, you need to throw a psychic shield around yourself and the others, and that includes the servitors. You must protect them from the device's detonation.'

*Even Rauth?* wondered Karras.

'Do you understand, Alpha? You must shield them immediately.'

'Acknowledged,' said Karras. 'But once the accursed thing has done its job, how are we to know? How do we access the results?'

'From the moment of detonation, a psychic backwash will begin. It will be similar to receiving information via clairvoyance. Of all present, you alone will be able to process the data. Only you will be able to discern it fully, to understand it. To that end, the moment it is safe to do so, you must drop your barrier and open yourself to the psychic resonance. It is only the initial detonation that is dangerous to the others.'

Karras shook his head. 'You have not prepared me adequately for this, Sigma.'

'There are no preparations for this. Trust your Librarius training and your gift and you will see. The resonance will imprint directly on your awareness not only a clear knowledge of the terrain ahead, but the density of life forms and any concentrations of psychic strength. This knowledge will be critical to the survival of the team and the success of this operation. Now attack the hexagraphe, and be ready to shield your squad.'

The others watched, unsettled, uncomfortable with things beyond their understanding and unsure of what they should do. Karras ordered them closer together, the easier to shield them all. Then he began to focus violent energies on the orb.

He spread his feet wider and tensed, allowing his inner gates to widen, channelling a flow that changed from a stream to a crashing torrent. Something in the air changed. The others felt it. Skin prickled beneath thick armour. Karras bared his teeth. He felt so strong, so alive. As balefire manifested around him, licking over the black and silver of his ceramite, he wanted to call out, to roar a battle-cry. It was too long since he had felt this. He bunched his muscles, focused, intense, and the strange white flames surrounding him began to flare taller and brighter.

The others watched as the air darkened the floating orb. It seemed to be

swallowing what meagre light existed in these surroundings. Soon its spherical form was lost in a nebulous black shadow that simply hung in the air and continued to grow. As it grew, a screaming sound filled the minds of all present, all of them but one: the Exorcist, Rauth.

Karras began chanting a low mantra, words taught by Cordatus that would concentrate the flow like a laser. Centering his awareness in his lower abdomen, he unleashed a level of energy now that could have ripped a gunship from the sky or could have torn a tank to pieces.

The scream of the strange eldar device reached its peak. Everything went suddenly black. There was a deafening sound, a mighty crack like a great tree splitting. Karras switched focus, throwing up a bubble of psychic defence just in time. Even so shielded, the Space Marines and servitors were buffeted backwards a step. The lambent water below the rocky bridge on which they stood became rough with choppy waves that lapped against the cavern's sheer walls.

Normal light returned, the light of the bioluminescent moss, the crystals and the glowing waters below. There was no sign of the hexagraphe now. None at all.

‘Drop the barrier and ready yourself, Librarian!’ ordered Sigma.

Karras did so, and the flood of information began, washing over him like a torrent.

In his mind's eye, he saw the tunnels that led from this cavern, thousands of passageways – no, tens of thousands – from lava tubes no wider than a fingertip to massive gaping roads that could accommodate a Thunderhawk in flight. He saw every intersection, every pit, every body of cold, still water, the stalactites, the stalagmites, the flowstones and the deep, undiscovered, untapped veins of margonite, soledite and a thousand other materials from common to priceless.

And then there was the foe.

At first, he sensed only the footsoldiers. Genestealers. Mindless individuals slaved to one far greater. They were deadly enough in their own right. Even alone, a genestealer was capable of killing a Space Marine if only it could engage him at close quarters. They needed no weapons. They *were* weapons, crafted by evolution to the point of absolute lethality. Their speed and stealth allowed them to get close. Their claws and talons could shear through ceramite as if it were little better than tin. Perhaps worse still, they could implant members of a host-species with gene-altering packets of organic material – the genestealer's kiss by which they spread their abhorrent infection, undermining from within all those who would stand in their way.

*And there are so many, thought Karras. Thousands of them. We can hardly hope to make a dent. I see now why this cannot be a purge. By the Throne, if we become trapped down here...*

And yet, the worst was still to come. As the hexagraphe's explosive psychic resonance sped further along the twists and turns, Karras sensed the tyrannid nests – vast nurseries filled with new abominations waiting to be born. Not just genestealers. The infestation had already reached a new phase. Other organisms were being born – other variants, larger and smaller both, all lethally specialised expressions of tyrannid genetic evolution. And there were people down there – trapped, infected and doomed. One of them had to be White Phoenix.

Suddenly, his awareness was wrenched away from them, yanked forcibly towards something incredibly powerful. He knew it could be only one thing.

He felt another power looking back at him, sensing him, scrutinising him.

He knew it was the broodlord, because he had never sensed anything so cold and so alien. It was a mind utterly inscrutable, and his own withdrew from it on reflex, repelled by the darkness within it.

*Here is death, he thought. Here is the reaper made flesh.*

The motto of his Chapter had never seemed hollow to Karras. Not even for the briefest moment in all his centuries of war.

*Fear not death, we who embody it in His name!*

He had always been proud to live by those words, to fight under banners bearing them in bold Gothic script. But, by the Throne, those words sounded hollow now. This beast, this tyrannid monstrosity from beyond the domain of man... It embodied death with a perfection and authority Karras could not dispute. This was a being perfectly evolved to kill in every conceivable way. Yes, it was the broodlord that embodied death. Not he.

'Insanity,' he groaned, and glared at the servo-skull hovering just in front of him. 'And now it knows us, Sigma. Now it knows who we are and what we are. The horde is mobilising. The hunt has begun. And we are the prey.'

Chyron's insides bubbled with anger and impatience. Better they had left him in stasis on the *Saint Nevarre* than drag him down here to stand guard in an empty chamber no one, not even the enemy, cared about.

A black pox on the wretched miners that made the tunnels too small for him. He ought to be with the others. Who knew what they were doing right now? Vox-comms had quickly eroded to nothing but hissing static as the rest of the kill-team had moved further and deeper into the planet's bowels.

He raged at the thought of others seeing combat while he sat here like a glorified watch-dog. By the souls of all those lost, it was an outrage. An outrage!

Looking at the gun-servitor quietly covering the tunnel mouths and passageways at his back, an impulse flickered through him, only momentary, but there nevertheless. It was the urge to obliterate the little man-machine. The servitor had done nothing wrong, but such was the rage within Chyron that no one and nothing was safe when such a mood took him.

He cursed in the old dialect of his swamp-covered home world – a birthplace he had shared with many of his late battle-brothers. Even as he called the old curse to mind, his anger was cooled and was replaced by that deep melancholy to which he was far from a stranger.

*Am I the only one left who curses in such a way? Might there not be some remnant of the Chapter out there among the stars, perhaps looking for others who survived the battle with the hive fleet?*

The hive fleet in question was the vast tyrannic incursion which had struck the Ultima Segmentum like a sudden, lethal plague. *Hive Fleet Kraken*.

By Terra, there had never been darker days than those. Chyron had been there at the beginning, but his performance against the tyranid vanguard had marked him for Deathwatch service, and he had left his brothers to serve the Watch with honour, believing he would soon return to them with many scars to show – and perhaps even with access to the Watch's advanced weaponry, a factor he had once hoped would help turn the tide.

Scars he had in great abundance, of course. So many, in fact, that his body needed this damned iron box to keep the pieces together. But though he had won honour and more with his deeds, when the time came to end his term of service,

there was no Chapter left to which he might return.

As far as Chyron knew, none left alive bore the heart-and-bloody-tear icon of the formerly mighty Lamenters.

He was no fool. Chapters vanished. It happened. The war for dominion over this sprawling galaxy demanded blood by the oceanful. It could not be won without sacrifice. But the knowledge did nothing to salve his spiritual wounds.

There were few places to take solace. One, of course, was in ending the lives of as many foul tyrannid spawn as he could hope to encounter. It was why he became so enraged at the thought of others battling while he stood and waited. The other was in that narrow thread of hope, his most fervent wish, that one day, he would see the Chapter icon on another Space Marine's pauldron, and know for sure that Chyron Amadeus Chyropheles was not the last of his kind.

Fight on till then, he told himself. Earn that moment with the blood of your foes.

There was sound from behind him: a metallic clattering and a shuffling that echoed briefly from the high chamber walls.

Chyron turned casually, unconcerned, thinking that perhaps his mindless companion was merely adjusting itself. As he did, there was the sudden roar and flash of ignited rocket fuel.

Something white hot raced from one of the tunnel mouths straight towards Chyron's glacis plate. He saw it spiral towards him almost in slow motion, on a trail of white smoke that stretched out from the tunnel mouth like a ribbon.

He was still turning when it struck him hard and exploded, punching off a thick chunk of armour from the upper left corner of his frontal plate. The impact sent him staggering two steps back.

Had the missile hit him dead centre, he might have joined his fallen brothers there and then.

Bolter-fire erupted from the gun-servitor's weapons, shaking its pale form as it rattled a torrent of rounds into the tunnel mouth so clearly marked by the missile's trail. Screams of agony and the wet sound of internal detonations followed as at least some of the rounds found enemy flesh.

Chyron recovered his balance and was about to add fire of his own when, from at least a dozen passage mouths, armed targets surged forwards, firing and screaming like men possessed.

Bright, thick beams of las-fire licked across Chyron's plate, scoring it, tracing deep lines in the outer layer, but doing little real damage beyond that. Futile, too, was the fusillade of stubber and pistol-fire that rattled off him in bursts of sparks

and metal chips.

*You cannot harm me. You have made a fatal error in judgement. The price will be your lives!*

Chyron fired back, stitching an entire hemisphere of the chamber with a stream of lethal shells from the assault cannon that was his right-side armament. The large-calibre bullets tore through bodies as if they were made of naught but wet tissue. Blood gushed over the cold floor, quickly freezing there in great icy slicks. Corpses, many of them torn in half by the raw power of the weapon, slapped to the ground and lay their steaming, leaking all their heat into the air as their contents slid out to quickly cool.

Between them, Chyron and the gun-servitor met that first wave with such deadly force that the chamber was turned into an absolute slaughterhouse.

The Dreadnought lost all thoughts of regret and self-pity then. All he knew was battle-lust and the joy of slaughter. Who were these foolish people that they attacked a member of the mighty Space Marines? No ordinary member, either. What manner of men would hurl themselves at a Dreadnought?

His arrogance and revelry in bloodshed undid Chyron then.

He heard a clang. A vibration shook through his right side. He tried to turn to see what had happened, but his arc of vision didn't extend to looking down at his own form. It was fixed forwards. He rotated further and saw a strange-looking man with shining yellow eyes backing away from him.

*Four arms! He has four arms!*

'What have you done?' Chyron roared at him.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned his assault cannon on the retreating figure and opened fire.

The hail of bullets turned the target to bloody mulch. There was nothing left that resembled human form at all. But, no sooner had the strange enemy been obliterated than Chyron discovered what the noise and the shudder had been.

*Demo charge!*

An explosion rocked him, knocking him from his piston-powered legs, hurling him twenty metres across the icy chamber floor in an uncontrollable skid.

Parts of his right arm and shoulder showered to the ground, a hail of plasteel and adamantium that had only moments before been his primary weapon.

Chyron's HUD went wild with warning lights. Alarms screeched at him.

He ignored them all. With a roar of absolute rage, he struggled to his feet, levering himself upwards with the power fist that was his left hand. He turned his gaze back to the centre of the chamber just in time to see the gun-servitor

overwhelmed and torn apart by thick-set men with mining lasers. Others were still pouring from the tunnel mouth, a great surge of armed insanity intent on the Dreadnought's absolute destruction.

Another missile arced out towards him, but he saw it coming and managed to avoid it by a hair's breadth. His sensors blinked a temperature warning as the missile's tail-fire brushed him. It struck the wall a few metres behind him. The concussion wave kicked him forwards and pelted him with a rain of small rocks.

Chyron rose again, set his stance wide and roared at the mob rushing towards him. He lifted his power fist into the air, the weapon crackling with deadly arcs of blue energy.

'To me, you brainless dogs! To me, you twisted fools! Chyron of the Lamenters will teach you how to die!'

## 8

Still on the rock bridge where they had deployed the eldar psychic mapping device, Karras took a moment to brief the others on the path ahead. The hexagraphe had done its job, and in a remarkable way. To Karras, it was almost like having an automapper inside his brain, only far, far more advanced. He could almost feel the tunnels, feel the currents of hot and cold air that pushed and pulled through them. They were like great calcified arteries leading to yawning caverns that were like vast fossilised hearts.

I know where we must go. I know exactly which route to take. I can even see an exfil path that will cut around the cave-in. What a device, indeed. But if I fall in battle...

‘Listen,’ he told the others. ‘I have to give you this knowledge. I have to share with you the map I have in my head.’

‘How do you propose to do that?’ asked Zeed. ‘Draw it out?’

‘I’m going to imprint it directly on your minds. Solarion, come forwards.’

‘I don’t think so, Karras,’ said the Ultramarine. ‘You’re not messing with *my* mind.’

‘Don’t waste time, Talon Three. You’re on point. You need the information and there’s no other way. Or at least none faster.’

Solarion was still reluctant, so Karras stepped straight towards him and thrust his open palm onto the point-man’s breastplate. ‘Ready yourself. This may cause pain.’

He said it quickly, giving Solarion no real chance to protest further before Karras speared a tendril of psychic force into the Ultramarine’s mind and wrote the relevant information directly onto it.

When he took his hand away, Solarion crumpled forwards, gasping, breathing hard. As he straightened, he groaned. ‘Don’t... don’t ever do that again.’

‘Do you have it?’ Karras demanded. ‘Can you see?’

Solarion turned his attention inwards for a long quiet moment before he responded.

‘Incredible,’ he muttered. ‘Yes. Yes, I see it. I don’t know how you did that, and I don’t bloody like it, but I have it all as if I had memorised it from somewhere myself. I know where White Phoenix is. I know where the nurseries

are. And, Throne help me, I know where the broodlord is, too.'

'I will go next,' said Zeed, unsettlingly eager, pushing past Solarion to stand before Karras. It was apparent he still wanted a shot at the broodlord, despite the warnings of the inquisitor.

When Solarion, Zeed and Voss had all accepted the psychic transfer, Karras turned in the direction they must follow.

'Wait,' said Voss. 'What about Watcher?'

'He will move with the rest of us,' said Karras. 'He doesn't require the transfer.'

'What?' said Zeed. 'Why not?'

'Drop it, Ghost,' said Karras. 'Check your chrono. Five hours and sixteen minutes until the extraction deadline. Almost half our allotted time gone and we're not even halfway. So we had better pick up the pace. All of us.'

Voss and Zeed threw each other a look. Even with their helms on, they understood each other. It was nothing to do with the chrono. Whatever lay between Karras and Rauth was the real reason the Exorcist was not being imprinted as they had been. They didn't like not knowing. But the tone in Karras's voice said it was the wrong time to push him.

'I'm designating this cavern RP2. Omni, I want these bridges rigged with charges. The next time we pass through here, we'll have a lot of company. The structures in this cavern will work to our advantage. With a minimum of explosives, we can at least slow the genestealers down. They'll have to scale the walls and ceiling to pursue us. Can you manage it?'

'Of course I can, Scholar. A few melta-charges will rip right through these spans.' He leaned over the edge of the rocky bridge under his feet and looked down. 'It's a long drop to the water.'

'Margonite-infused solutions are highly corrosive,' said Karras. 'Anything that falls in there isn't stepping out again. Watch your footing, all of you.'

Voss moved to one of the gun-servitors and began pulling melta-charges from one of the munitions crates. Then he set about placing the charges where they would do the most damage.

'The enemy is on the move,' said Karras. 'Solarion, Zeed, Rauth. I want another ammo cache here. See that crevice by the tunnel mouth behind you? Bolter mags and grenades, well hidden. Two canisters for the flamer. Half of all the spare ammo the servitors are still carrying. The other half we'll need for a cache at RP3.'

'You think we need another rendezvous point?' asked Zeed.

‘I do. We’re going to burn through a lot of rounds when we hit the nest. We’ll need every last cache we can establish once we’re falling back.’

Within moments, the tasks had been completed and the Space Marines, plus their three mindless drones, were ready to move deeper into the enemy’s lair.

Before they did, Karras opened a secure private channel to the inquisitor.

‘Sigma, there’s something you need to know. When I read the resonance of the hexagraphe, I sensed the life-force of several human prisoners in the tyranid nurseries. All female. All...’ He swore and shook his head. ‘All swollen with xenos abominations. Do you copy, Sigma? Do you understand me? They’re carrying tyranid young. One of them is White Phoenix. There’s no doubt. I recognised the signature of the implant.’

There was no answer. The servo-skull just floated there, trailing its long silver thread like a hovering spider.

‘Sigma?’ Karras pressed. ‘This changes things. Please advise.’

Nothing.

Karras swore again. On the mission channel, he addressed the others. ‘Listen up, brothers. We’ve just lost comms to the *Saint Nevarre*.’

‘What?’

‘We’ve lost Sigma. The link is dead. He’s offline.’

Voss reached out a hand and tapped the servo-skull. It bobbed gently in mid-air.

‘Good bloody riddance,’ said Zeed. He snatched the skull out of the air, dropped it to the ground, raised a heavy boot, and crushed it violently.

‘What in Dorn’s name did you do that for?’ demanded Voss.

‘It made me feel better.’

‘I could have configured it for semi-autonomy and voice command,’ complained Voss. ‘We could have used it.’

‘To what end?’

Voss had no immediate answer.

‘Enough,’ said Karras. ‘It doesn’t matter. The drone served its purpose. Now the relay is dead, we have no need of it.’

He felt conflicted about losing Sigma. On one hand, it was freeing. He was in full command now, as he should have been from the start. The inquisitor had cast a shadow over the mission which had been a source of constant tension from the start. On the other hand, this *was* an Ordo Xenos operation. Sigma still had some important calls to make. White Phoenix carried an alien inside her. That had always been a possibility given the foe they faced, though Karras had truly

expected to find the woman dead. Under any other circumstances, a Space Marine would not hesitate to end both those lives. But Sigma had been adamant about recovering his asset alive.

*Very well. I'm not about to second guess him. We will follow the last orders as they stand. We will try to keep her alive for extraction, despite her condition. We will drop her at his feet. Let the inquisitor deal with his own mess.*

He sensed the horde still heading towards them, getting nearer with every heartbeat. The longer he and his squad spent here, the more time he gave them to fill the tunnels. He pointed to an exit just to the right of a column of milky-coloured flowstone on the far side of the cavern. 'That's where our target lies, brothers. Talon Three, you're on point. Move out.'

Solarion led them out of the shimmering cavern and back into the relative gloom of the old lava-tubes with their patches of glowing blue bioforms.

'One more thing,' said Karras to the others as they moved. 'Safeties off, and I'm rescinding the Stalker round order. They know we're here. We're on assault protocols now. Kill on sight, understand? From now on, we go in hard.'

Karras heard safeties being clicked off up and down the line. Free at last to read the auras around him, he felt, too, the surge of battle-lust in his brothers, and acknowledged his own. But his was tempered by feelings of dread, for unlike the others, his gift – some would say his curse – told him just how many genestealers they faced.

He knew they would not evade the broodlord itself for long.

*Down here in the dark, we are five against thousands, to say nothing of the power of their leader. Would that you were with me here, my khadit. Would that I had an entire company of my glorious brothers. I could use such strength and more.*

*As dauntless and deadly as my squad-brothers are, I fear we are marching into the jaws of certain death.*

## 9

It got steadily warmer as the kill-team pushed on. Warmer and more humid. The curving rock, constantly pressing in on them from four sides, became damp and slick. Veins of metal and crystalline compounds glowed dully, some of them seeming to pulse with a rhythm like a slow, steady heartbeat. Still the tunnels wound further and deeper into the depths.

Karras charted their progress in his head, knowing by virtue of his gift exactly where they were in relation to the maze itself and the beasts that now hunted them. But he was also sharply aware of the data on his retinal display. Vox contact had dropped to a range of only thirty metres. He had heard nothing from Talon Six for hours. He had sensed the Dreadnought's soul in the backwash of the hexagraphe, but it was lost to him now. He didn't know what that meant. Was Chyron still with them? The distance was too great, and the margonite concentration in the walls was too high, to be able to tell with any certainty.

As for the others, since leaving the cavern he'd designated RP2, they had been tense and, for the most part, silent. He could feel their doubts, almost see them with his mind's eye. They rippled across the surface of their souls, like the ripples from a stone dropped in still water. Karras carried those same doubts too, but he couldn't afford to show them. The rest of the kill-team must believe absolutely that he had full confidence in his own command. They had to believe he knew exactly what he was doing, and that meant he had to believe it himself. It was the crux of any authority. The leader had to know best. So he pressed them forwards, guiding them with as little hesitation as possible.

And all the time, he felt the psychic focus of the enemy locked on to him like a laser-targeting beam. The mind of the xenos monstrosity probed at his, looking for weaknesses, chinks in his psychic armour, anything the beast could exploit to get inside his mind and read his intent, or drive him mad with alien thoughts.

But Karras was First Codicier of the Death Spectres. He had fought dark wills before. The wards on his body and the mantras in his mind made him a hard shell to crack. Moreover, he was able to shield the others from similar attempts. He could not hide their presence. Their warrior spirits were strong. With that one glaring exception, their souls shone too brightly to properly mask. Karras might just manage to hide his own, or project it elsewhere, but Solarion, Voss and Zeed

were, in ethereal terms, lit up like beacons.

The same was true of the broodlord, of course. Such a nexus of raw power couldn't hide, no matter how much margonite surrounded it. But there was something else. The broodlord wasn't the only powerful presence further down in the tunnels. There seemed to be another locus of energy close to the tyrannid leader. The nature of this being was harder to read, for its psychic signature had elements in common with the broodlord, and yet was significantly different, too. Almost human somehow. A corrupted astropath? Impossible to tell as yet.

Up ahead, Solarion was emerging from the end of yet another tunnel and out into a broader space. Karras emerged second. The rest of the kill-team followed him out into a wide cave with a low ceiling lit in shifting patterns of dull orange and red. The heat inside it was intense.

'Not good,' said Voss, stopping on Karras's left. 'The footing will be treacherous here.'

From cracks and craters in the cavern floor, puddles of glowing magma bubbled and churned. Narrow streams of molten rock ebbed from gaps in the walls. The black surface of those walls looked almost like the skin of some vast, burned creature, lambent blood leaking thickly through tears in its fire-crisped flanks. This was not a safe place.

Most of the floor looked solid enough, but looks could kill. Much of what seemed stable might only be the cooled skin of an old bubble, mere millimetres thick. To step on it and break through it might be to plunge one's leg into boiling magma. Even Space Marine power armour would succumb if submerged for a few seconds too long in a substance of such incredible heat.

'Solarion,' said Karras, 'can you find us a route across?'

The cavern had only one exit on the far side – a gaping tunnel mouth, the edges of which had a strange, melted-wax appearance, a result of how the cavern and tunnels had been formed.

Solarion drew his long, serrated combat knife, went into a crouch and, without another word, started edging forwards, probing the ground before him with the point of the sixty-centimetre blade.

Karras ushered Rauth, Zeed and Voss to follow the Ultramarine, slow and steady. Then he turned to the gun-servitors.

'Command code: Bastion,' he told them. 'Cover both exits. Lethal force. All non-identicode-bearing targets viable. Confirm.'

The servitors turned their blank faces towards him. Their vox-speakers crackled.

‘GS-18 confirms,’ said one. ‘Bastion protocol active.’

‘GS-11 confirms,’ said another. ‘Bastion protocol active.’

‘GS-5 confirms,’ said the last. ‘Bastion protocol active.’

Karras glanced down at the ammunition reserves strapped to the back of the servitors’ chassis. Each carried grenades of various types and magazines loaded with bolter-rounds. One carried two extra promethium canisters to refuel Voss’s flamer. And then there were the remaining melta-charges.

Without turning, Karras ordered the others to a halt.

‘Omni,’ he said. ‘Would you be able to rig these walls?’

‘Thinking of using the magma?’ Voss asked.

‘I’m thinking it would be a damned good deterrent to anything in pursuit.’

Voss paused for a second to consider it.

‘It would mean using the last of our charges, Alpha, but I think you’re right. It would be easier to breach those walls and cause a magma flood than it would be to collapse the tunnel mouths, for example. And by Dorn, I’d love to see the results.’

‘Then I’m designating this chamber RP3,’ said Karras. ‘It’s close enough to the target to be a good first fall-back point and we can give them a proper bloody nose here. The gun-servitors are staying to secure it. Go ahead and rig it, Omni. Solarion, find him a stable path over to the walls. The rest of you stay put for now. We’ll do a final weapons check before we move on.’

While Solarion and Voss moved left towards the cave wall, Zeed addressed Karras.

‘How long until we see some killing, Scholar?’

‘They’re almost on us, brother. There’s a four-way tunnel intersection about two hundred metres up ahead. I’m guessing we’ll have first contact there. Be ready.’

‘And yet you choose to leave the gun-servitors here,’ said Rauth.

‘I do,’ said Karras. ‘The servitors give off only the merest trace of any kind of psychic residue. In essence, they are almost as soulless as—’ He almost said *as you*, but he caught himself. Even so, Rauth must have guessed what was on his mind. ‘I’m counting on that to keep them from notice.’

Did the topic of souls disturb Rauth? Was he even aware of his condition? Impossible to tell. Even without his helm, Rauth’s face was all but unreadable at the best of times. No emotion ever played out on it, at least none that Karras had seen.

‘We’ll need their fire-support on the way out,’ the kill-team leader continued.

‘By then, we’ll have the whole nest coming down on us. So I’m keeping them out of the fight until we need them most. Objections?’

No one spoke.

‘Good,’ said Karras. ‘Because I’m Alpha here and the decisions are mine to make. Listen to me and do as I say, and we may yet get out of this alive.’

Karras was presenting as cold and confident a face as possible. In truth, he knew their chances. The odds were almost laughable, but it was not in a Space Marine’s constitution to ever give up. They had established three solid fall-back positions, each with ammunition caches. Two were rigged with explosives to buy them extra time in their retreat. If they made it back to the exfil point with the foe on their heels... Well, maybe Chyron would get his fill of killing after all – if he yet lived.

*Be patient, Old One, and you may yet extract some revenge for your fallen brothers.*

Karras couldn’t know then that Talon Six was already waist deep in blood and fire.

Minutes later, with RP3 rigged and ready, Talon Squad followed their point-man out of the blistering chamber and into yet another tunnel that was barely wider than an individual Adeptus Astartes. Unsurprisingly, this caused problems for Maximion Voss. His broad bulk – from shoulder-to-shoulder a great deal wider than any of the others – forced him to move sideways along the passage.

‘Don’t get stuck, tree stump,’ jibed Siefer Zeed. ‘We need this tunnel clear for the journey back.’

Voss snorted. ‘Go brush your hair or something.’

Zeed laughed and made another riposte. So it went, back and forwards for a minute or so.

Karras, focused as he was on the dark presence ahead and the kill-team’s descent towards it, nevertheless found himself grinning a little at the banter between the two Space Marines. Their rapport was something he envied. It wasn’t just a matter of their personalities, either. He recalled some of Damaroth’s hardest trials, the ones they had run as a kill-team, heavily poisoned, disoriented and beset by simulated foes. He had seen the way Zeed and Voss had moved together, each complementing the other’s strengths, compensating for his weaknesses, all without a word needing to be said between them. *Cohesion*. The Watch captains had stressed its importance. It was something the entire team should have shared. Perhaps in time...

*No, thought Karras. I’m not that naive.*

‘Throne and sword, Alpha,’ snapped Solarion. ‘Will you shut them up?’

Karras’s first instinct was to shout the Ultramarine down – these warriors were walking into death’s jaws. Let them laugh as they did so. But Solarion wasn’t entirely wrong. This was no time to lose focus in favour of levity. He needed all of them razor sharp, fingers on triggers, righteous death-dealing foremost in their minds.

‘Omni, Ghost,’ he said with some reluctance. ‘Ice the vox-chatter, now.’

It was as much of a rebuke as he felt like issuing. For their part, Zeed and Voss conceded, guessing rightly that it was prudent not to press their Alpha too far, and the team moved on. They stepped out into a small, rocky chamber and took up positions covering each of the passage mouths that opened onto it, with the sole exception of the tunnel they had just exited.

‘Where are they, Scholar?’ demanded Zeed.

‘They’re closing fast,’ said Karras. ‘A lot of them. Back-to-back, all of you. Now!’

The kill-team formed a tight fighting circle, bristling with bolter muzzles. Voss lit the igniter at the business end of his flamer.

‘How far, Karras?’ Solarion asked, voice tinged with tension, rough with the readiness to kill. ‘Range?’

Faint scrabbling sounds began to reach their gene-boosted ears, vying for attention with the beating of their hearts and the rushing sound of the increased blood flow in their veins.

Muscles twitched eagerly. Adrenaline levels and body temperatures increased. Their super-human physiologies were primed for combat, ready to fight like no normal man ever could.

The scrabbling sounds got louder.

‘Twenty metres,’ said Karras. ‘Front and sides.’

Louder still; a frantic clatter of claws on rock.

‘Fifteen metres, Talon Squad!’ said Karras.

Harsh chittering and screeching joined the clatter of the advance now. The sounds came out of the dark, like a vanguard of ghosts sent to cause terror ahead of the physical threat.

‘Ten metres,’ shouted Karras. ‘This is it! Fight well, brothers. For the honour of the Deathwatch and for the glory of your Chapters! Fear not death!’

Shapes burst from the shadows at speed: tall and terrible, a great tangled mass of fang and claw, of chitin armour and long, spidery limbs. The first to emerge came straight for the Space Marines with eyes aglow and jaws dripping,

compelled to commit savage and bloody slaughter by the alien mind whose impulses they served.

‘Engage!’ roared Karras.

Muzzles flashed. Sheets of white flame gushed forth.

Absolute violence swallowed everything.

## 10

Diamond-hard claws slashed the air just millimetres from Zeed's visor. Had he not been faster, swaying backwards at the last instant, his head would have been taken clean off. The momentum of the savage swing carried the beast too far and it was open for a crucial half-second; a half-second in which, at point-blank range, Zeed unloaded a single bolt-round up through its lower jaw and out the back of its distorted purple head.

*Genestealers! Of all the foes to face in tight quarters...*

The body dropped hard, revealing others coming straight towards him.

They had to leap the bodies of their dead, giving Zeed a scant few metres' grace before they were on him. Decades of relentless training took over, coordinating his movements, impelling him to lethal action almost without conscious thought. He raised his bolter and put a single round in the forehead of each. Their heads snapped backwards, exploding as the bolts detonated within. But a third creature was coming in low on six limbs, skittering forwards like a scorpion intent on striking down its prey. Suddenly it leapt, long limbs splayed out, ready to attack with any of them.

Zeed knew better than to step backwards, trying to avoid the killing claws. Instead, he lunged forwards with all the power of his legs, slipping inside the monster's guard. As he did, he balled his left hand into a ceramite-plated fist and, with all the momentum available to his gene-boosted, power-armoured body, drove it hard into the monster's face.

The beast's head was jolted backwards, but it didn't stagger. It recovered quickly, lifting its limbs high for a killing blow, screeching with rage. But that screech would be the last sound its throat ever loosed. Zeed whipped his combat knife free from its sheath with his left hand, quick as lightning, and drove it straight through the genestealer's exposed neck. Then he turned away, using all his bodyweight to rip the knife free. The serrated blade left almost nothing of the muscle and connective tissue. The genestealer collapsed, crashing to the rocky chamber floor with its neck gaping wide, head lolling at a gruesome angle.

Others were still pouring from the black tunnel mouths. The Raven Guard resumed firing, adding the sound of his bolter to the deafening noise of the others. Ammo counters dropped with frightening speed. Bodies lay everywhere,

but the assault didn't seem to be slowing.

'Stand firm!' yelled Karras.

A great sheet of fire roared out from Voss's flamer. Seven distorted alien forms began an agonised dance in the middle of the blaze before they collapsed, their flesh melting off to leave only black and smoking bones.

'Talon Four, cease fire,' ordered Karras. 'Conserve that ammo. This wave is almost at an end!'

Voss slung his flamer in favour of the bolt pistol holstered on his left cuisse. He flicked off the safety just as the last line of genestealers erupted from the tunnels. The Space Marines' guns rattled a deep tattoo. The frenzied aliens were mowed down even as they closed with their prey.

Rauth killed the last of them, putting two bolts in the beast's torso, dead-centre mass. As this last member of the alien assault tumbled dead to the chamber floor in front of him, the Exorcist hit the release catch on his bolter and dumped another empty mag.

Zeed, almost giddy from the combat high, surveyed the charnel house scene before him.

Bodies lay strewn everywhere. Footing was poor; the ground was slick with shining wet viscera. Brass bolt-casings surrounded the feet of the Space Marines, slowly being enclosed in a sea of cooling alien blood.

'That's it?' he asked Karras.

The team leader was reloading his bolter. 'That was a probe, Ghost. The broodlord wanted to see what we can do. Now he knows. If anything, we've just proved that we deserve special attention. They'll be coming for us in real numbers now.'

Voss swapped his pistol out for his flamer again. He looked at the heaps of dead bodies all around them. '*Real* numbers?'

'How many are we talking about, Alpha?' Solarion asked. Tension had robbed his voice of its usual caustic tones.

Karras faced his squad. 'Too many for us to handle, and that's not something I say lightly. Sigma told us this was not to be a purge. There's good reason for that. We can't afford to get locked down and have to fight it out. Look at your chronos, Talon. The readout is yellow, now. So we move fast, or we die here. I'm not planning on the latter.'

Zeed rammed a fresh magazine into his bolter and cocked it. 'Then let's get a move on,' he said, 'because, that taste of combat has left me hungry for more.'

It was here that Karras finally told them all that the kill-team must split up.

Only Rauth did not voice objections, and Karras was hardly surprised. He had the feeling the Exorcist had known all along that this moment would come. Only Rauth was truly invisible to the broodlord's psychic senses. Karras could suppress his gift again, and mute the signature his soul gave off so long as he did not exercise his powers, but he could not mask the others at the same time. To travel as a squad meant being tracked. That left only one course of action.

'We will not be able to retrieve White Phoenix while under assault,' Karras told them. 'Solarion, Voss and Zeed, I need the three of you to head south towards the largest nurseries or hatcheries or whatever the warp they are. Cause as much damage as you can. Wreak havoc on them, a storm of slaughter so great they will have no choice but to send everything they have against you.'

'That's your plan?' raged Solarion. 'Use us as a diversion? Expendable, are we? No, Karras. I don't think so.'

'Listen,' barked Karras. 'There's something you ought to know. Tell them, Rauth. Do it!'

The Exorcist glared at Karras, but he would say nothing. Instead, he stepped away, bolter raised, and covered the exits in silence.

Karras cursed in frustration. 'Then I will tell them. Our Exorcist brother here gives off no spiritual signature. He has no presence in the immaterium. Do you understand me? The enemy cannot track him. They cannot even see him unless they have actual physical line-of-sight.'

He let them process that a moment. 'It means the broodlord does not know he is here.'

'How is that possible?' asked Voss. 'I thought all living things had an ethereal signature. How can a Space Marine lack a soul?'

Karras looked at Rauth, but the Exorcist presented only his back.

*Indeed,* thought Karras. *A Space Marine with no soul, and yet he lives and fights just as we do. It should not be possible. It goes against everything we know. And yet, here he is.*

There was no time to think on it more. Not here. 'How does not matter,' he told Voss. 'I'm certain that Sigma knew of this... anomaly... and that he planned to have Rauth split off from the rest of the kill-team to recover the woman. I will be going with him as insurance. We cannot risk so much on only one of us.'

'Can the broodlord not see you also?' asked Voss.

'He sees me clearest of all, brother, but only while my power is unshackled. I will suppress it again, now that Rauth and I will be separating from the rest of

the squad.'

'You're still using us, Death Spectre,' hissed Solarion.

'Of course I am,' snapped Karras. 'You are members of my kill-team. We have a mission to accomplish, and this is our best chance of success. I am no more using you than Sigma is using all of us, but we are Deathwatch. This is what we do, and we are sworn to it by solemn oath. Let's get the job done and get out of here. We will rendezvous at RP3 and fight our way back to the exfil point together. Is that clear? I expect all three of you to meet us back there. Do not disappoint me.'

'I'm in,' said Zeed. 'I'll take a straight fight over tip-toeing through tunnels with some woman on my back any day.'

'Aye,' said Voss. 'We'll give them a fight, all right.'

They looked at Solarion, who looked back at them blankly for a moment.

With an angry grunt, he finally agreed. 'Very well, Alpha. I'll do as ordered. But know this: if you plan to spend our lives as coin for your own escape, my shade will haunt you for the rest of your days.'

Karras lifted both hands and disengaged the seals of his helm. He lifted it from his head, then he stepped directly in front of Solarion.

'Look into my eyes, brother. Look, damn it! And listen to me now. Whatever you think of me, know that you are respected and valued, a crucial member of my kill-team. More than that, you are my battle-brothers, all of you. And I will not leave you behind. *I will not!*'

His eyes blazed with intensity and emotion, and even Solarion had to admit to himself that he believed him.

'Go south-east for half a kilometre. Move with speed. There is a cavern at the tunnel's end. You already have the knowledge. Visualise it. From there, take the leftmost tunnel. It slopes down towards several of the enemy birthing chambers. There you will unleash your fury on them.'

'How will we know when you have the woman? How will we know when to fall back to the rendezvous point?'

'I cannot mask the woman's soul, nor the signature of the creature in her belly. Once we have her, the broodlord will sense her moving away from the nest. In a fury, it will turn all the forces at its command to her recovery. You will know that we have her when the assault on your own position slackens. Pray for us then, because they will be coming for us. All of them. We will need your strength as soon as you can give it. Hurry to the RP. Without you, Rauth and I will have almost no chance of survival.'

His words sat heavy on the air. It was such a long shot, but all of them had known long odds before – had known them and survived them, if only by the skin of their teeth.

When Karras finished replacing his helm, Voss moved forwards and gripped his wrist tight. ‘Emperor watch over you, Scholar.’

‘Fight hard, all of you,’ replied Karras. ‘Do yourselves proud, for the honour of Watch and Chapter both.’

They parted, two moving off into the abyssal black tunnel to the north, three heading south-east as ordered.

Karras felt a weight in his stomach as he and Rauth moved at a heavy trot.

He could not shake the feeling that he had just sent three exemplary Space Marines off to their deaths.

If so, both he and Rauth would not be far behind them.

# 11

As they ran, Karras glanced sidelong at the recalcitrant Exorcist.

Of all his kill-team operatives, Darrion Rauth was the one about which he knew the least. Save a very few rare exceptions such as the Badab War, the exploits of Rauth's Chapter were shrouded in unusual levels of secrecy. There seemed some link to the Inquisition's Ordo Malleus, but it was vague and tenuous at best, at least as far as records went.

What he did know was that Rauth had earned the nickname Zeed had given him.

*Watcher, he calls him, and with ample cause.*

Karras would have been a fool not to notice how often Rauth's cold, withering gaze was on him. Worse still, his hand never strayed far from his weapon when in Karras's presence. It was as if he expected violence to erupt at even the unlikeliest of times.

*Has he taken it upon himself to act as some kind of bodyguard? Has he been so instructed without my knowing? It can't be that. His manner... It doesn't fit. Then, what?*

Together, he and Rauth moved at speed along a slowly-curving downwards tunnel that branched north from the chamber in which they had parted from their fellows, then turned slowly north-east. It was pitch black here. They'd had to activate the rail-mounted lights on their bolters again.

Karras had closed the inner gates on his power almost completely for now. What little he allowed through was spent on forcibly reducing the brightness of his soul and projecting that dimmer ethereal light well away from his true position. It took a certain amount of steady concentration, and while he maintained it, he could not psychically detect enemies that might be nearby, but what he did detect was the change in their surroundings. One only needed eyes for that.

The walls were changing. Instead of bare, natural rock, they had become strangely ribbed, as if the two kill-team operatives were descending down the gullet of some vast creature as yet unnamed.

Karras slowed to study them. Rauth ran on, then noticed Karras was no longer pacing him and stopped. Karras heard the slight shifting of ceramite plates as the

Exorcist brought his bolter up.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘The walls,’ said Karras. He stepped over to the tunnel surface on his left and angled his bolter’s light onto it. ‘See for yourself.’

Rauth moved cautiously over to his side and looked down.

Karras reached out a hand and touched the surface. It was as he had suspected. The further they went, the more it became apparent: the walls were organic. They were in the nest for real now. Originally, the tunnel would have been a natural lava tube, or perhaps a path cut by a massive prehistoric rock-eater. But now the rock surface was covered with a shiny, waxy substance marbled with a network of fine lines that looked like veins. Rauth drew his knife from the sheath at his lower back and stabbed the point into the strange wall. The immediate surface was still somewhat soft, being composed of younger, newer growth, but the deeper the point of the blade went, the harder the material became. When Rauth withdrew his knife, the wound he had made began bleeding a thick, sticky substance – sap-like in consistency but with the colour and smell of super-oxygenated blood.

‘It bleeds,’ said the Exorcist.

Karras nodded. ‘It’s alive and it’s growing on its own, spreading out from the centre of the tyranid nest. We are almost there. The locatrix is not far ahead.’

They moved back to the centre of the tunnel, Rauth sheathing his blade. Side-by-side, they continued at a run down into the darkness. The air was stiflingly hot and humid now, but the filters, seals and regulatory systems of their power armour rendered such changes meaningless in terms of discomfort.

When they had gone a few hundred metres further, and the growth on the walls became noticeably thicker, Karras remarked on the strange shapes their lights now described. The forms on the tunnel walls became more complex in structure. He saw cross-ribbed swellings and serrated spurs. There were thousands of craters clustered in groups, each containing a barnacle-like mouth from which tiny fronds, barely visible, waved. As the Space Marines passed these, they whipped inwards and disappeared completely, the beaks snapping shut with an audible clack.

‘We must talk, brother,’ said Karras, ‘about why the broodlord cannot detect you.’

They kept running, and Rauth made no reply.

‘I noticed it the first time we met. You give off no resonance at all. I’ve never known anything like it.’

It was not a question, and Rauth did not treat it as such.

Karras's tone became sharp.

'As your Alpha,' he said, 'I have a right to know.'

'You know everything you need to,' growled Rauth in reply. 'I have no psychic signature. I do not resonate. Accept it. Use the knowledge to your advantage, as you do now. Do not waste time and energy pressing me for the how and the why. I cannot and will not speak of it. My Chapter has its laws just as yours does.'

Silence fell between them again.

Eventually, Karras said, 'Very well, brother, but the truth will out sooner or later. It always does.'

'Then it will out for you, also. Think on that.'

As they pressed on, Karras dimly sensed the broodlord stirring. He had not expected to, not with his talent closed off to him, but the abomination's aura was throbbing powerfully with psychic thunder, strong enough to feel even with his gift suppressed. It was sending out a terrible impulse, compelling its hordes of chittering killers to move south-east in the direction of the other kill-team members.

Their storm of carnage and destruction had begun.

Karras clenched his teeth, adjusted his grip on his bolter, and increased his pace, acutely conscious that Zeed, Voss and Solarion were fighting to buy him time.

'It has started,' he told Rauth. 'The tyrannids move against the others. We must be swift.'

Rauth matched his speed. 'May the Emperor lend them His fury.'

Whatever gulfs of misunderstanding and mistrust lay between Karras and Rauth, against the xenos threat, they were Deathwatch operatives united by oath. It would serve them both to remember that, Karras knew.

He and Darrion Rauth would stand together, fight together, even die together.

*And the latter perhaps sooner than either of us might wish.*

## 12

Voss stepped over the body at his feet, jammed his pistol into the genestealer's mouth and blew out the back of its head. It flopped back, twitching, four arms splayed out.

He looked down at it and cursed. These foul creatures were an offence to the eye. Perhaps if they hadn't borne so many features inherited from their host species... But the telltale signs of their parentage were plain for all to see: the thumbed hands, the configuration of facial features, the play of muscles beneath the skin of the neck – all this and more besides.

*Corruption*, thought Voss. *They twist everything to their own pattern. What guides them? What purpose drives them across so much space just to absorb and multiply?*

Mankind had no answer, but for now, at least, there were still men alive to ask. How much longer would that be so? The tyrannids surely represented the greatest threat by far to the Imperium. They were implacable, remorseless, insatiable. There was no bargaining to be had. You killed them, or you were killed.

Zeed stepped past him, sheathing his long knife.

'Not out of breath, I hope, brother.'

Voss grinned beneath his helm. 'Show me to more of them and you'll see.'

Solarion joined them, having surveyed his own kills and reloaded his empty bolter. 'They'll be coming soon enough. Let's move a little deeper and do some more damage.'

Around them lay not only the first wave of genestealers who had been sent to defend this place, but the amniopods and birthing sacs from which the broodlord's vicious progeny were meant to hatch. They wouldn't be hatching now, however. Solarion, Zeed and Voss had torn through the place like a murderous wind before the first genestealer defenders had arrived. Half-formed creatures had spilled out in a wash of nutritional fluids as the Space Marines had wrenched open protective shells and cut through fleshy membranes. They had stamped on these unborn creatures, ending early the lives of beings that would have gone out to claim so many others.

There was no pity in their hearts. The xenos young were simply monsters waiting to grow into full lethality. Their destruction was the Emperor's work.

Solarion took point without being asked, and they moved on, deeper into the heart of the alien nest, looking for the next birthing chamber in which to conduct their righteous slaughter.

They found one soon enough, large and humid, the air thick with noxious gases emitting an unwholesome, acrid stink. But the horde had been fully mobilised against them now, and there was no time to kill the tyrannid young before the walls were swarming with full-grown genestealers.

Back at the junction after the assault of the first wave, Zeed had said he wanted more.

Now he got it.

Solarion's breastplate screeched in protest as a talon raked it, tearing a great, jagged rent across its embossed honour-markings and Deathwatch iconography. Warning glyphs flickered to red life, his visor projecting them directly onto his left retina.

#### *ARMOUR INTEGRITY COMPROMISED*

The offending creature, hissing and spitting savagely as it readied itself for a killing lunge, suddenly choked out a wet cry and fell to the ground in two pieces separated at the waist. Behind it, the Raven Guard was already moving away, engaging another knot of xenos abominations, bolter blazing, firing one-handed as he gripped his combat knife in his other.

Solarion added his own gunfire, cutting down three large genestealers that were trying to flank Maximilian Voss from the right.

The chitin-covered cavern walls strobed with muzzle flashes. Genestealers were crawling all over them, climbing out from holes between faintly glowing cysts that were swollen close to bursting with embryonic alien forms. Quivering sacks of flesh lay pale pink and glistening wherever there was a corner or crevice. Wall-veins and ribbed umbilici, as white as the eyes of a blindfish, pumped nutrient-thick fluids to clusters of queer eggs that hung from between the stalactites above. Occasionally, a stray bolt would rupture them, and a rain of thick, smelly fluids would fall to the ground. It hardly mattered if it rained on the Space Marines. Their armour was already awash with gore.

The genestealers poured out towards them in numbers seemingly without end. The broodlord's earlier probing attack had convinced it of the threat these armoured intruders represented to its nurseries, to the swelling of its forces and its eventual domination of the planet. It was time to remove that threat.

Even as Solarion revelled in the bloodbath, he recognised that he and his two

irreverent Deathwatch brothers could not stand for long against numbers like these. They fought for the sake of Karras and Rauth, but he was less than willing to die for them.

*Come on, Death Spectre. Retrieve the woman and get moving so we can pull out of here.*

He knew he carried too few rounds to last much longer if the genestealer assault maintained its intensity. Voss was wielding his flamer again, gloriously effective against enemy ranks so dense, and the Imperial Fist was taking an impressive toll on the foe, but sooner or later, his weapon would run dry and there would be no more canisters of promethium to fuel it. Not until they returned to RP3.

*If we ever get that chance.*

‘More contacts,’ shouted the Raven Guard. ‘Front right, high.’

Solarion looked up. Another wave of hissing, six-limbed forms poured into the nursery chamber from a quivering, fleshy orifice in the ceiling, an obscene sight.

Zeed’s bolter barked out a greeting, and four of them fell with shots neatly placed in their brains and breasts. Solarion added three swift kills of his own to his tally. But not all of the genestealers could be killed at a safe distance. There were simply too many for that, and they moved so fast. Even Zeed, supreme at close quarters, would meet his death if the fighting went hand-to-hand. Against one or two at a time, he might just hold his own, but not against more than that.

*How much longer, Karras?* thought Solarion bitterly. *In Guilliman’s name, how much longer?*

If he, Zeed and Voss could only manage to break away from the fight in the next few moments, then maybe, if the Emperor was with them, they might just live to see the end of this damned fools’ errand.

He tried not to wonder if the prize was worth his life, nor to wonder how, if they didn’t make it back, Sigma would report their increasingly inevitable deaths to their respective Chapters.

## 13

‘In Terra’s holy name,’ groaned Karras. ‘I knew, but to see it with one’s own eyes...’

He and Rauth had entered a chamber of grotesque horrors, the sight of which, he knew, would stay with him forever, a reminder of reality’s darkest, cruellest face. It was the birthing chamber in which the primary objective awaited them. White Phoenix ought to be here, not just because the locatrix said so, but because this chamber was different from any other they had come across in a single, crucial way:

*Women! Dozens of them. They have become a part of the nest, incorporated into it by their captors. Such a gruesome fate.*

Karras wanted to turn away, sickened and infuriated.

More than half of the women were fixed to the strange organic walls of the chamber by a mix of dark chitin plates and thick strands of a sticky substance like some kind of tough mucus. The others were half enclosed in equally disgusting organic mounds dotted about the cavern floor. Pools of pungent yellow-brown liquid bubbled and steamed near them. Ropes of semi-translucent flesh fed or withdrew fluids from their bodies, snaking into their noses and mouths. Gratefully, Karras saw that the women’s lower bodies were fully encased, though their grossly distended bellies were exposed to the hot, humid air. He had no doubt there were similar organic catheters beneath the chitin, responsible for Throne-knew-what. Those bellies were so stretched by the xenos organisms growing within that the skin had become as translucent as the looping coils of strange umbilici. In some, the Death Spectre could see jostling clusters of embryonic aliens vying with each other for the most comfortable positions. The women playing host to these slithering forms wept and whimpered in an agony that pierced their mindless stupor.

Rauth was murmuring some litany that only those from the Basilica Malefix on Banish could possibly comprehend. His fists were clenched so tight that he had lost feeling in both hands.

‘And I saw the true face of darkness behind that veil, and it did blind me with its horror,’ quoted Karras numbly.

Rauth looked over at him. ‘Uxol Thay’s *Necrisod*.’

‘Volume three. His visions of the sixth hell.’

Rauth moved forwards, mag-locking his bolter and drawing his combat blade. ‘We should not let them suffer like this.’

Karras halted him with a hand on his right pauldron, palm pressed to the horned-skull icon there. ‘Agreed, and we *shall* end their misery, but we have a mission to complete, and our brothers are fighting for their lives so we can do just that. We will release them from their suffering after we extricate White Phoenix. Not before. The mission has ultimate priority here. We may be beset at any time.’

Rauth nodded once and brushed off Karras’s hand. He kept his blade ready in his own.

Karras checked his retinal display and found what he was looking for.

His battle-helm’s subsystems had locked on to the source of a repeating electronic life-signal. A small, red, triangular reticule appeared, marking the precise location of the opticom they had been moving towards all this time. Karras blink-clicked the reticule off and saw a wretched figure lying bound to a pulsing organic structure. It looked part-altar, part-incubator, and on it was White Phoenix, the primary objective.

‘That’s her,’ he said pointing, and strode over to her side.

Looking down at her, he saw deep scratches, crusted thick with blood, on her arms, face, neck and chest.

*She fought them.*

It hadn’t made any difference, but at least she had tried. He turned his eyes to her abdomen and saw that it was horribly distended. She was pregnant like the others, her belly stretched taut with early signs of the chitinous armour which the creature within was already forming. It would emerge ready to protect itself.

That emergence would be no quiet, slithering escape, either. It would rip and tear its way out, bursting forth in a tide of its dying host’s blood. Not one of these women would survive the birthing process. The creatures, when ready, would erupt through their flesh, then turn on their mothers and feed on them until nothing was left, not even the teeth, hair and bones.

*Eat. Absorb. Incorporate. Spread.*

So it went, the tyrannid life cycle. It was a thing of absolute simplicity, but the halting of it, the stemming of that tide, was anything but simple. Countless brothers had already fallen in the attempt: Ultramarines at Macragge, Blood Angels and Angels Vermillion at Hollonan, Brother Chyron’s own Lamenters at Devlan and Malvolion, and so many more. Many yet would fall, and with no

clear hope in sight.

Karras locked his bolter to his cuisse and, leaning forwards, tugged hard at the foul, sticky mass restraining White Phoenix. First, he worked to free her head and neck. With a cracking sound, a handful of chitinous matter came away trailing wet strands and tangles of what looked like human hair. It was the woman's hair. As he pulled more of her bonds away, more hair came with it, falling out so easily. All her nutrients were being leeched away by the alien inside her. Karras paused, wondering if removing her from this abominable apparatus might kill her. She seemed so pale and thin. He had never seen her before, so he could not know that men of great power and influence had once coveted her. She had been an example of superb human genetics once. Now, she was little more than skin and bone. And yet, Sigma would have her returned. He had sent Talon Squad down into the depths of this dark, filth-ridden hellhole to get her back.

Again, he questioned the true motives behind this operation. Just what was her strategic importance to the Ordo Xenos? Well, it hardly mattered for now. Here she was, and it was his job to get her out, whatever Sigma's motives might be.

As he pulled away more of the biomass from her body, he hoped his squad brothers were still alive. Talon was *his* kill-team. They were *his* operatives. *He* was responsible for their survival. But, as tempted as he was to send his astral self out to check on them, he would risk alerting the broodlord to his location. Not yet. It was too early. He just had to trust in their skill and hope they would rendezvous with he and Rauth as planned.

Suddenly, the woman's eyelids fluttered open, surprising Karras and causing him to freeze. She turned her head slowly to regard him.

'She's conscious,' he whispered to Rauth over the link.

The Exorcist, who had been covering the exits while Karras had been busy pulling her out, came closer and leaned in to snatch a brief look.

One of the woman's eyes was completely bloodshot. The other was a gunmetal-grey orb with a glowing red lens for a pupil. 'Space... Marines...', she murmured.

'Yes,' answered Karras. 'Deathwatch.' Against her barely audible voice, he was all too aware of the grating sharpness of his own, modulated as it was through his helmet's vocaliser. Without knowing quite why he did it, he reached up and removed his helm.

His face was too harsh to be called handsome, criss-crossed as it was with scar tissue and old burns, as pale as snow and with blood-red eyes. But it was a more

human face than she had seen in all too long. More than that, it was a Space Marine face, the face of a warrior, the face of her salvation. The woman smiled up at it weakly.

‘Kill us all,’ she said. ‘Don’t let us be... be used like this.’

‘I was not sent to kill you,’ said Karras. ‘I was sent to get you out.’

The woman shook her head. ‘No,’ she told him. ‘It was not me he sent you to recover.’

*She knows it is Sigma who holds our leash.*

He replaced his helmet and addressed Rauth, using the link so she would not hear. ‘She wishes death. Would that I could grant it.’

‘She is not likely to survive the extraction,’ Rauth returned. ‘Look at her. Death will come soon enough. Your hand need not hasten it.’

‘She believes it is the unborn beast Sigma wants, not her. But he was adamant we try to extract her alive.’

‘Then she is mistaken about his interests. Regardless, we should make haste.’

‘I will carry her,’ said Karras. ‘You take point.’

‘Very well. But first I shall set the others free.’

They looked again at the walls and grotesque mounds, and at the pitiful creatures trapped there.

‘Mankind must wipe out this tyrannid cancer,’ snarled Karras. ‘Surely no other xenos race is as worthy of our hatred and rage.’

Rauth raised his knife.

‘No,’ said Karras. ‘There is not enough time to kill them that way. We will move to the exit and use our grenade launchers. Inferno rounds. We will burn everything to ash.’

So they did, and granted all the Emperor’s mercy.

Something happened, a sudden change that rippled across the enemy ranks. The genestealers froze in their attack and turned their heads to the north, as if hearing something the three blood-spattered Space Marines could not. Those nearest to passageways and tunnel mouths vanished into them, like great cockroaches scuttling for shadow, but the genestealers closest to the Deathwatch operatives resumed their attack, their targets too close to turn from, still intent on slaying the power-armoured intruders.

Even as he cored the torso of the closest with a triple burst of explosive bolts, Solarion called out over the link to the others. 'That's it. That must be it. They've got her!'

The others made no response, their minds lost in the joys of the killing.

Voss was closest. He had switched to his bolt pistol and knife. The flamer was down to half a canister. With the enemy ranks less dense, he didn't want to waste it. Solarion stormed over to him and gripped the edge of his pauldron. He tried to turn him, but it was no easy task. As well to try and turn Chyron. 'Time to fall back, brother. We must rendezvous with them at RP3. They will need our strength.'

Until the broodlord's silent psychic call, the fighting hadn't eased off for an instant. Checking his chrono, it was hard for the Ultramarine to believe just how briefly he and his fellows had been here. Adrenaline and battle-focus did strange things to one's experience of time. The peak of the genestealer onslaught had lasted only minutes, but it felt a lot longer than that.

No further waves of tyranid organisms were emerging into the chamber now, and those that remained were thinning rapidly in number, cut down by Zeed, who continued to ignore the Ultramarine's calls to pull out.

Lifeless bodies lay where they had fallen, piled together in slick, wet, steaming heaps. Perhaps a dozen live threats remained. A dozen genestealers, still more than enough to kill them all if they got within striking distance.

One dropped from the ceiling, landing with a clatter of chitin behind Voss and Solarion. Long arms flashed out towards the Imperial fist, but the sound of its landing had given the Ultramarine just enough time to turn. He emptied the last three bolts in his mag, blowing big holes in the creature's torso and head, then

dumped his empty clip and slid home another.

*My second last.*

Voss turned to see the creature dead on the cavern floor.

‘Thanks, Prophet.’

‘Thank me by getting your oversized backside out of here. And stop calling me Prophet.’

They turned to call on Zeed and found the cavern suddenly empty.

‘For Throne’s sake,’ raged Solarion. ‘Where in the blasted warp is that idiot?’

He tried the link again and again, voice rising to a shout.

‘Get back here Raven Guard. Get back here now, curse you!’

A black figure emerged from one of the far tunnels at a run.

‘Let’s move,’ said Zeed, voice unusually flat. He didn’t stop. He ran straight past them and out of the chamber. Voss and Solarion broke into a run behind him.

‘What happened, Ghost?’ asked Voss. ‘What did you see? Is something in pursuit?’

The Raven Guard was being uncharacteristically tight-lipped.

‘No,’ he told them. ‘We need to regroup with the others. I have to speak to Scholar.’

Solarion snorted doubtfully. Voss threw Zeed a curious look. But whatever was bothering Siefer Zeed, he would say no more about it, so they ran in wordless silence, hoping they wouldn’t be too late to help the others.

The woman in Karras’s arms was bleeding from all the places where they had tugged out tyranid umbilici. Every juddering step Karras took seemed to wrack her with fresh pain, but he couldn’t stop. Not now. Not with death breathing down his neck. So he ran, and Darrion Rauth ran with him.

Behind them, genestealers filled the tunnels, screeching and chittering as they raced after their prey.

‘Keep going,’ shouted Karras. ‘RP3 is not far now.’

Intermittently, Rauth would turn and fire a burst of deadly bolts back at their pursuers, but his ammunition supply was getting dangerously low. Since the horde had diverted towards them, he had downed scores of genestealers. But it never seemed to make a difference. There were always more emerging from the walls and ceiling, skittering out from every hole they passed. Karras couldn’t turn his own weapons on them, not with the frail woman in his arms. He wrestled with a near overwhelming desire to put her down, unsheathe *Arquemann* from his shoulder, and face the foe. Space Marines did not run.

*Suffer not the alien to live.*

It was the motto of the Deathwatch, but did the urge behind it belong to him, or to the spirit of the force sword? He could feel the blade's lust for battle. It resonated, like the deep throbbing and pulsing of the air inside an enginarium.

Karras broke from the end of the tunnel and emerged into the junction where he had earlier split the kill-team into two groups. He kept running, Rauth just behind him, boots pounding on the cavern's stone floor. Just as Karras and Rauth were crossing the centre of the tunnel intersection, three shapes careened out of a passage on the left, moving so fast that they almost collided with the kill-team leader. Karras swerved right, trying to shield the woman, and raised the bolt pistol in his right hand. Bolter muzzles whipped upwards to take aim, but recognition came at that very instant. It was Solarion, Voss and Zeed, their armour scored and gouged in a dozen places from the battle in the birthing chamber.

For a split second, the kill-team operatives halted and blinked at each other, stunned by the fact that they were all still alive. Then Karras yelled at them over the link.

'Don't stop now. Keep moving!'

United once more, Talon Squad bolted from the junction, thundering up the tunnel to RP3 just as the genestealers emerged behind them. As they ran, Rauth dropped back behind Voss, taking the rear. Still running, he plucked two grenades from his combat webbing, primed the first, and dropped it.

Seconds later, there was sharp sound, more like an almighty crack than a boom, and a sudden gust of superheated air. Bestial screams followed. In the tight confines of the tunnel, the explosive fragmentation caused impressive casualties. Many died. Many others were badly wounded. But the horde would not stop. They did not feel fear. They served a savage mind without the slightest notion of pity or sorrow.

Fresh, unwounded genestealers thrust aside the bodies of their dead or dying kin and resumed the pursuit. In less than a minute, they were as close as ever.

Rauth dropped his second frag grenade, then pulled his bolter from its mag-lock and put on a burst of extra speed. The designated rendezvous point was just up ahead, less than a hundred metres away. He heard the detonation of the grenade behind him, heard the high screeches that followed. The death toll from the second was as great as the first.

Just ahead of Karras, the light was changing. The rocky walls at the end of the tunnel were rimmed in red from the glow of the slow-flowing magma that ebbed

from the pits and cracks in the cavern beyond.

Talon Squad exploded into the chamber.

And stopped.

Before them lay a scene of absolute carnage.

On every side, genestealer bodies lay shredded by the heavy bolter-fire of the three gun-servitors Karras had left behind. Other corpses were burned to black husks on the treacherous pot-holed floor. Pools of bubbling magma had already consumed parts of the dead, leaving an odd scattering of cracked and smoking heads and limbs, so blackened as to be almost beyond recognition.

The sight might have gratified the Deathwatch operatives but for two other elements. Firstly, the gun-servitors left to hold RP3 were strewn liberally around the cavern floor in countless dead pieces, their mechanical and biological components torn to tatters. Secondly, and of far more immediate concern, there were two figures waiting for the kill-team, standing dead-centre in the middle of the baking hot floor.

They were both beings of significant, almost overwhelming psychic power. But beyond that, in appearance at least, the similarities were few.

The smaller of the two was a tall man dressed in finely embroidered robes, with a long jewel-headed staff clutched in his right hand. He looked utterly incongruous in such a place, his face a mask of almost regal calm while all around him bubbles of glowing magma popped and hissed. On closer inspection, it was clear he was not really a man at all. The proportions of his features were off-kilter, somehow simply wrong, and despite his attempts to style himself some kind of high-priest, his eyes glimmered with an unwholesome alien light, to say nothing of their strange pupils. Psychic fire arced and crackled around him.

*A magus, thought Karras. A hybrid psyker.*

He was no weakling, despite his long, narrow frame. But the magus was, by far, the lesser of the two figures, for the other towered over him, at least three metres tall, and that while standing hunched over. It was a thing of nightmare: of heavy, ropey muscle that could pull limbs from torsos with sickening ease; of a super-dense armoured exoskeleton that standard bolts couldn't hope to even chip; of four long arms – two with curving claws like scythes and two with taloned hands – that could rip and shred even the heaviest armour plating as if it were mere tinfoil. Its face was an ugly mass of skin and muscle, ridged with tiny thorns and webbed with thick, pulsing veins. Its teeth – all too many and all too wickedly sharp – sprouted from a lipless slash that was disgustingly wide. This

was the broodlord, mighty and murderous, and its appearance hinted only at the least of its power.

Rauth, Zeed and Solarion brought up their bolters, but before they could fire, a wave of raw force struck them from their feet, hurling them backwards against the black chamber walls.

Voss stepped forwards with his flamer and was likewise batted aside as if his heavy body weighed no more than that of a fly. Only Karras stood unassaulted, and he knew it was only because of the groaning, bleeding woman in his arms.

*No, not the woman. The damnable parasite in her belly. Whatever genotype it is, it's important to them. That much is clear.*

Karras knew better than to think a mere bolter-round would get anywhere near this creature or its hybrid aide. The air around them both shimmered with more than just the heat of the chamber.

They were shielded against attack but, with White Phoenix in his arms, so was Karras. It was a standoff. The broodlord simply stood there, glaring at Karras with eyes devoid of recognisable emotion, irises of pale purple with pupils round and black.

The magus smiled.

Against the walls, the other four members of the kill-team struggled groggily to rise to their feet. Their weapons had been knocked from their hands. They reached for them, but the moment they gripped them again, they were pushed back and pinned against the walls. Again, the force that did this was invisible, but it was incredibly powerful. They all felt the air being crushed from their lungs.

Behind Karras, the scrabbling sounds of the genestealer horde became louder and louder. The creatures reached the edge of the tunnel leading into the chamber and stopped. There they waited in silence, simply watching, awaiting some psychic command-impulse from their master.

The magus spoke.

‘So, the venerable Space Marines deign to grace us with a visit.’

His tone was mocking, the words spoken with a strange humming quality, product of vocal cords not quite human. ‘And they come as thieves and murderers, as killers of children. How did it feel to kill so many of our unborn back there in the hatcheries? Proud kills to add to your tallies? How mighty you are, indeed.’

Despite the pressure on his chest, Voss managed to growl, ‘We’ll add you to that tally, abomination!’

The magus barely glanced at him.

‘A threat beyond your means to make good, as you are surely well aware by now. You continue to draw breath for one reason, and one reason only. The Master could eviscerate all of you with but a single thought. Even you,’ he said to Karras. ‘But you may yet live through this if some bargain can be struck. We care not for your lives. Go free and never return. Only, give us the woman. The child she carries belongs to us.’

As the magus spoke, Karras could feel him exerting psychic force, trying to employ unnatural powers of persuasion. It was the very power with which, as cult priest, he had influenced and controlled so many Chiarites, but it was a power wasted on Space Marines. Their minds were too strong, trained to resist, and the pentagrammic wards on their bodies only added to that shield.

‘Xenos lies,’ grated Zeed, voice straining with the effort of trying to speak without adequate breath. ‘I would rather die than bargain with a damned alien.’

‘That is not your decision to make, underling,’ said the magus. ‘I speak to your leader. What say you, blood-gifted one? You have the power. Read my mind, see that I speak the truth. Give us the woman, and leave our tunnels. Simple terms. Non-negotiable. Your position is the weaker here. Surely you see that, yes?’

Karras wasn’t so sure. He drew his combat knife from the sheath at his lower back and, with his eyes on the broodlord rather than the magus, he pressed the point of the blade gently to the skin on the swollen belly of the inquisitor’s agent.

The broodlord shrieked in rage, the sound so piercing it hurt Karras’s ears. The magus stepped forwards, eyes wide, and stretched out a hand in placation. ‘No,’ he said nervously. ‘Don’t. I promise you will all die here if you dare harm—’

‘If you knew anything about Space Marines,’ Karras snarled, ‘you would know that we do not fear death. We court it. It is our constant companion. We would be proud to die here, slaughtering as many of your disgusting kin as we can before we fall. And trust me, those numbers would be great. So, no. You are mistaken. Ours is not the weaker position here.’

‘Yet you stay your hand,’ said the magus. ‘You do not strike. Despite your words, you are not so ready to meet your end, I think.’

Karras didn’t doubt the magus was lying, trying to play him for a fool. He made a gambit of his own. ‘We have other enemies than you,’ he told the hybrid. ‘Greater enemies against whom some of us have sworn blood-oaths of vengeance. I would see us have that vengeance. And to have it, we must leave here alive, mission accomplished or otherwise. So, very well, you may yet have

your beloved parasite, but only if you meet my terms.'

The magus frowned, unsure, but he inclined his swollen, distended head for Karras to proceed. 'Which are?'

'Your master will release my brothers and allow them leave. Once I am satisfied that they are at a safe distance, I shall hand the woman over to you. Do you understand? I will give her to you and then *I* will leave. But so help me, if you attempt to interfere with our departure, we will unleash death on you such as you can scarcely imagine. You have the power, too. Read my mind if you dare and see what will come of betrayal.'

The magus closed his eyes and raised a long-fingered hand to one of the broodlord's massive chitin-covered forearms. He did not read Karras's mind, fearful, perhaps, of some psychic trick. Instead, he was silently conferring with his overlord.

Karras took that opportunity to communicate with the others in Space Marine battle-sign.

*All: retreat to exfil point at speed, he ordered.*

*Do not wait.*

He hoped they would trust him and follow his command. He did not intend to martyr himself here. He had already marked the locations of the explosive charges he had ordered Maximion Voss to place on these very walls. Voss had the detonator, and Karras doubted he could contrive some way for the Imperial Fist to pass it off to him, but it didn't matter. He had other means at his disposal.

Sigma had ordered Talon Squad not to engage the broodlord. But the accursed thing was right here within striking distance, and it was too good a chance to pass up. The footfalls of such a creature heralded the doom of entire worlds.

The monster had to die.

The magus removed his hand from the broodlord's arm and took a step forwards. 'We find your terms acceptable, Space Marine. These others will be allowed to leave. They must go now, before the Master changes his mind.'

Karras, his knife still pressed to the woman's belly, half turned to his kill-team. 'Get out of here, now. All of you. Go.'

They moved around to the other side of the cavern, Karras moving with them as far as he was able. At the mouth of the exit tunnel, Voss hesitated. 'You can't mean to do this, Scholar.'

'Get back to the exfil point,' Karras commanded. 'Fire the signal-round and call in Reaper flight. That's an order.'

'You're abandoning the mission, Karras,' warned Solarion. 'You'll be executed

for this.’

‘I said go.’

There was much swearing and cursing as they left him there. Voss almost had to be dragged away by the others, but soon they were gone from view. Karras listened to the sound of their boots on the tunnel floor as they ran.

Once the sound had faded, he nodded to the magus.

The hybrid stepped forwards.

‘You must see, Space Marine,’ he gloated, ‘that the destiny of this galaxy – nay, the entire universe – lies with our race, not yours. And yet you humans resist us, struggling futilely against the inevitable day when all you represent will be incorporated. Within our great united race, there is no competition, no treachery or betrayal. There is no selfishness. We are the embodiment of equanimity. All are rendered equal, for we are, in truth, simply cells in a single vast life form. Your species will become part of that, its genes blended with ours to live on forever.’

*Not while a single Space Marine still draws breath,* swore Karras.

He let the magus rant. He used that moment to send out a psychic tendril seeking his kill-team. They were moving fast, almost hitting the halfway point to RP2. He edged closer to the mouth of the exit tunnel and stopped. His escape route was only two metres behind him now.

He checked his mission chrono and felt his heart speed up. The readout had turned orange.

*01:32:01.*

*01:32:00.*

*01:31:59.*

Time was uncomfortably scarce.

‘Enough words,’ he told the magus. ‘Take her. But move slowly. Any tricks and I’ll cut your damned parasite in two.’

The magus carefully laid his ornate staff on the cavern floor, raised both hands in submission, and walked slowly forwards to receive the woman. The broodlord was still, silent, watching Karras with unblinking eyes.

‘No deceits, Space Marine,’ warned the magus coldly as he neared. ‘They would only doom you.’

When he was two metres from Karras, he stopped and turned his hands flat to receive the swollen, sickly body of White Phoenix. ‘The birth will occur soon,’ he said. ‘We must get her back to the nest quickly.’ The monster in the woman’s belly shifted and thrashed against the walls of its fleshy prison. Karras felt a

definite psychic emanation from the parasite. The magus felt it, too. His face lit up as if he were in some kind of rapture.

It was the moment Karras needed. With the magus distracted, he stepped in, whipped up his right leg, and booted the foul hybrid directly in the sternum. There was an almighty crunch of shattering bone and the robed figure flew backwards, hitting the ground hard. His right arm splashed in a pool of molten rock and he screamed, a high and terrible sound. Behind him, the broodlord screamed too and took a lumbering step forwards. The genestealers waiting at the mouth of the opposite tunnel burst into the chamber like floodwaters, flowing around their leader, heading straight for Karras with lethal claws outstretched.

Karras stepped backwards towards his exit, still holding the woman tight in his arms, and mustered power from within. He reached out with astral energies to Voss's explosives, found them on the walls, and ignited their fuses with a single thought. This done, he instantly threw up a powerful bubble of protective energy.

The explosives blasted inwards, rocky debris scything through the air, cutting down several of the genestealers at the sides of the charging mass. Glowing magma erupted from breaches in the black walls and flooded into the room.

The broodlord hissed with rage and threw up a protective screen of its own, against which the magma crashed and surged but could not penetrate.

The magus, on the other hand was too slow to shield himself, still reeling from the pain of his smashed ribs and his blackened, withered arm. He screamed as the molten rock rolled over him, and thrashed wildly in unspeakable pain as it closed over his head and destroyed all trace of him.

Karras saw all this happen in the space of a heartbeat, but he didn't wait around any longer than that. His shield could not be maintained for more than a matter of seconds, not against such constant heat and force. As he was turning to make his escape, he glimpsed the broodlord turn the other way and make its own retreat, the river of magma between them too thick to ford.

*So you survive, beast,* thought Karras sourly. *But I can still finish my mission if I hurry.*

He raced away from the flooded chamber and pounded up the tunnel towards RP2 with the sagging woman in his arms. He could sense masses of genestealers moving through parallel tunnels to the north and south of his position, racing to try and overtake him. He couldn't allow that. He couldn't let them flank him. He ran with everything he had. They would be wary of harming the woman while the parasite was still inside her, but would it hold them back? Karras doubted his

bluff would work a second time, and the magus was gone. He didn't think the broodlord and his purestrain genestealers would be inclined towards verbal negotiations.

He knew he would be seeing the alien overlord again before this mission was over.

Then something bulky suddenly emerged from the tunnel wall in front of him and brought Karras to a sharp, jarring halt.

## 15

‘Did you kill it?’ asked a gravel-rough voice.

Karras recognised it at once, relief mixing with anger in equal measure.

‘I told you to get to the exfil point!’ he snapped.

‘Did you *kill* it, Karras?’ Darrion Rauth asked again.

Karras shook his head. ‘It lives, though the magus is dead.’

He should have guessed the Exorcist might be waiting. Like Karras himself, the magus and the broodlord wouldn’t have sensed Rauth hiding there in the tunnel, standing by to offer support.

‘Give her to me,’ said Rauth. ‘Quickly. If the monster shows its face again, you’ll need to fight it. You’re the only one who can.’

Karras passed the woman gently into the Exorcist’s plated arms. ‘Be careful. She clings to life by a thread.’

Up ahead, he sensed the others. Then he sensed something else. Waves of genestealers were converging on them from multiple tunnels. Genestealers and something bigger, something different they hadn’t yet seen. The broodlord was still to the east, behind them, forced to circle around. But it was hunting them.

Karras and Rauth ran as fast as they could, but even without their precious burden, they wouldn’t have been in time. Their three Deathwatch brothers were about to be engaged by significant enemy strength. If Karras and Rauth wanted to regroup with them at all, they would have to find another way around.

The kill-team was once again split in two, with a horde of xenos foes separating them and less than ninety minutes on the mission chrono.

*Operation Night Harvest* was not going well.

‘Run, you clods!’ shouted the Ultramarine.

Zeed and Voss had been laying down a lethal covering fire, burning through ammunition far faster than either would have liked, but now they broke from the fight and turned. In the tunnel up ahead, they could see the Ultramarine facing them. He dropped to a knee with his bolter raised. Zeed heard rounds whipping past his shoulder to embed themselves in the bodies of the genestealers close behind. He didn’t turn to look. With the genestealers so numerous and so fast on their feet, a staggered retreat was the only option, but with the chrono ticking, it

was far slower than he'd have liked.

Only twenty metres separated the Raven Guard from the Ultramarine when the tunnel wall to the right suddenly exploded. Solarion vanished in a cloud of black dust and stone chips. Behind Zeed, there was a roar and a rush of white light. Voss had turned to punish their pursuers with righteous, cleansing flame. In the tunnel confines, the lethal blast of blazing promethium was inescapable. Scores of the hideous wretches collapsed in withering heat, leaving little but charred husks and ash. Others – those at the farthest extent of the weapon's effective range – screamed and thrashed in agony like wild marionettes, their muscle tissue bubbling and burning as the fire licked at them.

But something was moving in the cloud of dust up ahead. Something big.

Zeed heard a chilling double scream unlike anything he'd heard before. Then he saw it, the frontal section of something large and wormlike, plated in broad rings of glittering black shell. It cast its head about, searching for the Ultramarine, strange multi-part jaws working the air, hoping to bite down on its target.

Zeed still couldn't see Solarion. His view was blocked by the bulk of the monster. But he heard him growl something over the vox-link. In all the noise, it was difficult to make out – a curse of some sort, maybe.

'Omni! Contact front!' Zeed shouted to his friend. 'Something big!'

Voss's flames had bought them a little breathing space. Together, the Raven Guard and the Imperial Fist ran forwards up the tunnel, Zeed firing off rounds at the monstrous armoured worm. That armour, however, was too thick for any bolter-round to penetrate, and if Zeed thought his attack would draw the monster's attention away from Solarion, well, in that regard he was wrong.

'Prophet,' he shouted over the link. 'Respond.'

From the other side of the beast's massive cylindrical bulk, Zeed and Voss could hear three-round bursts of bolter-fire.

'Prophet!' Zeed said again.

'Damn it, Raven Guard,' came the voice at last. 'I'm a little busy here. And don't call me that!'

There was further cursing, then, 'It's no good. I can't even chip the thing. I knew we should have been issued Kraken rounds.'

At least the Ultramarine was to the west of the creature. He could still fall back to RP2, which lay just half a kilometre further up the tunnel. But the vast, wormlike enemy was blocking any hope of Talon Four and Five joining him. Clearly their weapons were inadequate against all that armour plate.

Zeed and Voss were within just a few metres of the creature's bulk now. Zeed slowed, knowing there was nothing in his arsenal to defeat such a beast. Perhaps if they had brought a lascannon, a meltagun, a plasma cannon, or his own beloved master-crafted lightning claws...

But, right now, those peerless claws were somewhere beyond the planet's ionosphere, in orbit aboard the *Saint Nevarre*. Next time, he would insist on choosing his own damned mission loadout, and to hell with Sigma.

Voss, however, had his own ideas. The Imperial Fist surged past Zeed, ran straight up to the side of the worm and thrust his gauntlets deep between two of the monster's exo-skeletal segments. With a booming roar, he threw all his tremendous augmented strength into pushing the sections of black plate apart. Zeed saw glistening purple flesh appear in the gap, soft, wet and sticky.

*Vulnerable.*

He leapt to Voss's side, thrust his bolter's muzzle against the exposed skin, and emptied half an entire clip deep into the body of the beast.

There was a repeat of the strange double-voiced scream, and the creature whipped its head around, throwing Zeed and Voss back against the wall to their right. But, as it turned to bring its glistening jaws to bear on them, the bolts detonated deep inside its flesh. The rounds, clustered together, caused a massive rupture, blowing out a great section of its body, covering the Space Marines and the tunnel walls in a disgusting shower of gore and chitinous fragments.

The creature slumped dead, rocking slightly from side to side on its rings, pungent smoke rising from the messy crater in its corpse.

Zeed and Voss pushed themselves up and looked at the results of their handiwork.

'Not subtle,' said Zeed, 'but nice.'

'It will do,' Voss agreed. 'I guess the tyranids found rock-eater genes somewhere after all. They must have incorporated them into one of their new bioforms.'

'You think too much, tree stump,' said Zeed, kicking the lifeless mass of the thing with the toe of his boot.

The creature suddenly jolted, and they both levelled their weapons at it with a start, though Zeed's was now already empty. But the thing hadn't returned to life. It was just Solarion, pushing his way past the limply clacking mouthparts to rejoin them.

If Zeed and Voss had expected any thanks, they were mistaken.

'Once you're finished feeling proud of yourselves, perhaps we can get a

bloody move on. RP2 is just up ahead.'

He vanished back around the monster's corpse and they could hear him break into a run on the other side, his boots hammering on the rocky tunnel floor.

They looked at each other a moment.

'Sooner or later,' said Zeed, 'I'm going to crack him one in the face.'

'I'll hold him for you,' Voss replied with a grin beneath his helm.

Zeed snorted his disdain for the idea.

'Hardly necessary.'

## 16

Solarion, Zeed and Voss found RP2 just as they had left it. The water so many metres below the strange natural bridges still cast its eerie white glow up to the cavern's ceiling. The hidden cache of ammunition and grenades was untouched. This was the room in which the inquisitor's hexagraphe had been detonated, but it bore no real trace of that event. The only sign there had ever been a hexagraphe was the orb's case, still lying open where they had left it. Fragments of Sigma's servo-skull were still scattered where Zeed had stamped on it.

Voss covered the point where the rock bridges met in the approximate middle of the cavern while Zeed and Solarion restocked on bolter ammunition. This done, they turned to cover him while he re-supplied himself with flamer fuel.

Then, on the single span of narrow rock that ran west towards the exfil point, they waited, and hoped that Karras and Rauth were somehow still alive.

Seconds felt like minutes. The silence was, in some ways, worse than coming under full assault. After all they had been through, the running and firing, the non-stop pursuit, the storm of slaughter they had rained on the birthing chambers, this relative quiet was unnatural and unsettling.

'What if they don't come?' murmured Zeed. He had just checked his mission-chrono and did not like what he saw. If they left now, just the three of them, they could make it back to RP1 and then to the exfil point with minutes to spare before the extraction deadline. Not many, but enough. Were Scholar or Watcher even still breathing? He almost wished he had powers of clairvoyance himself. Almost, but not quite. He could never truly wish for a Librarian's gifts. The dark fate often attached to them was too terrible.

There had been nothing from either of them on the link. *That doesn't mean anything*, he told himself. Comms at any kind of range down here were poor at best. Too many rare metals and strange crystals interfering.

How long was one to wait for those that might already be dead? How long did honour and loyalty demand? And what about the woman? Did they have her? Had Karras actually given her back to those monsters to buy their lives?

No. Zeed didn't believe that for one second. No Space Marine would bargain with a filthy xenos. *Suffer not the alien to live*. Karras wouldn't have done it. He'd had a trick up his vambrace, Zeed was sure. Rauth had held back to wait

for him. If things had gone awry, Karras had good support. Zeed might not like Rauth all that much, but there was no denying his cold efficiency. The Raven Guard could quite believe the Exorcist had no soul.

No one spoke. All of them, even Solarion, knew that, despite the relentless cycling of the mission chrono, duty and honour bound them together and dictated that they wait until the last possible moment. To return to Sigma without White Phoenix was to return in disgrace, their first Deathwatch operation a disaster. It would suggest that their Chapters had made a mistake in nominating them. It would mean that the Watch Council had made a mistake in approving them for deployment, and it would mean Sigma and the Ordo had made a mistake in trusting them. Alive or dead, they would be judged unworthy of selection.

*No, thought Zeed. I'll not go back to be labelled 'failure' or 'disgrace'. Not by Shrike, not by anyone. Especially not that damnable inquisitor. Not after what I saw back there in the heart of the nest.*

He hoped Karras was on his way. He had to tell him. Let Karras decide whether to inform the others or not.

The sounds of countless claws scraping on rock came to them now, getting louder as the Space Marines listened, accompanied by that distinct screeching and chittering, and the clacking of chitin shell.

‘For the Emperor,’ said Solarion, cocking his weapon.

‘For the primarchs,’ said Voss, his flamer held ready.

‘For Talon and the Watch,’ added Zeed.

The first cluster of horrid alien forms raced into the chamber, the genestealers’ powerful legs propelling them at frightening speed, eyes wide, filled with murder.

Bolters answered.

Hunched, ridge-backed bodies began tumbling from the rocky bridge, spinning end over end before splashing into the glowing liquid far below. Dozens fell that way. The bridge was narrow, funnelling the genestealers into a lethal cone of fire. The Space Marines simply couldn’t miss. Some of the genestealers, blocked by sheer numbers on the bridge, began to clamber up towards the cavern ceiling, the claws and talons of their double pairs of arms making light work of vertical walls.

‘Omni,’ shouted Zeed over the raucous rattle of his bolter, ‘cover the bridge while we pick the others off the walls and ceiling.’

Voss stepped forwards towards the foe, white flame roaring out in front of

him.

Zeed watched his latest kill tumble from overhead, down past the bridge, then targeted another, and another. Focused on the killing, he had all but put Rauth and Karras from his mind.

Then a black shape exploded out from a tunnel mouth on the right. Had the broodlord sent a flanking force?

The Raven Guard almost loosed a bolt at it, but checked himself just in time.

It was Darrion Rauth, sprinting full-tilt with the pale, pathetic figure of White Phoenix in his arms. 'Covering fire!' he was shouting. 'The beast comes!'

Just half a dozen metres behind him, Karras now burst into view, also running as fast as he could, bolt pistol in his left hand, the shimmering force sword *Arquemann* held single-handed in his right.

'Prepare to fall back!' Karras shouted.

A second later, Zeed saw why.

The tyrannid broodlord emerged after them at speed. It burst into the cavern with a deafening roar. Its thunderous footfalls shook stone chips loose from the underside of the bridge. It turned to face the Space Marines and screamed.

Voss had just purged a span of the bridge with a blast from his flamer when Rauth reached the junction at its middle. He leapt over the heaps of charred corpses, came level with the rest of the kill-team, dropped to a knee and placed the woman as gently as he could on the ground. Then he ripped his bolter from his right cuisse and shouted, 'Mag!'

Zeed stepped close, still firing, and let the Exorcist strip a fresh magazine from his webbing. Rauth hammered the magazine home into the housing under his bolter's barrel.

'Not that it'll make a damned bit of difference,' he spat and loosed a burst at the broodlord. Zeed saw at once what he meant. The triple-round burst detonated before ever striking the beast, such was the powerful protection of the psychic shell it was projecting around itself.

Karras was almost with them now, vaulting over the smoking bodies that littered the bridge.

'What are you doing?' he yelled. 'Pick her up and run!'

Rauth turned his muzzle towards a knot of genestealers breaking from the far tunnel and pressed the thumb-stud on his under-barrel grenade launcher. There was a dull whomping sound. Half a second later, the high-explosive round struck dead centre, blowing the tyrannids apart. Pieces of them rained down on the surface of the lake below. Then Rauth scooped White Phoenix back up into his

arms and turned for the exit.

Karras reached the others where they were laying down suppressing fire, and spun. The broodlord had just made the junction at the middle of the bridge. It turned, stance wide, and its eyes tracked Rauth as he sprinted into the west tunnel and disappeared.

‘Omni,’ said Karras. ‘Tell me you still have the detonator for the charges you placed here.’ As he said it, he holstered his bolt pistol on his left cuisse and held out his left hand. He had used psychic detonation once already. The broodlord would be wary now. If Karras sent out psychic force to set off the explosives, the monster might react to block it. Conventional means were a safer bet this time around.

Voss passed him a small metal cylinder with a flip-top safety release and a red button on the top. ‘You get one shot only with this, Scholar,’ he warned.

‘I know. Now move out, all of you. Get that woman back to the exfil point. Go!’

There was no argument this time. Zeed and Solarion each loosed a final HE[21] grenade-round from their own launchers, then sprinted from the cavern with Voss. The first detonation, high on the north-east wall, sent a score of badly wounded genestealers tumbling to their deaths. The second detonation struck the broodlord’s shield dead-centre. The beast raged and staggered back, but a metre only. When the smoke cleared, it stood unharmed, its furious gaze now locked on Karras. It broke into a lumbering trot, heading straight towards him.

*Keep coming, you ugly bastard,* cursed the Death Spectre.

With the detonator in one hand and *Arquemann* in the other, he prepared to slay this menace once and for all. Psychic power flowed along his arm and into the ancient crystalline matrix set deep within the rare alloy of the blade. The broodlord felt the concentration of building power. Its cold eyes flicked to the sword then back to Karras’s visor.

It didn’t slow its advance.

Karras’s retinal display told him exactly where all the explosives were. His helm’s spectrometer and tracking subsystems had pin-pointed their location by concentrations of scent molecules. The display marked them with small red reticules.

The charge of most immediate interest to Karras was the one stuck fast to the side of the bridge just ten metres in front of him – a charge past which the broodlord now ran.

Karras held up the detonator, arm extended straight out.

‘Far enough!’ he snarled at his enemy. He thumbed the release and hit the switch.

There was a peal of thunder, so sharp and close that it stabbed at his ears.

The broodlord bellowed in outrage as the rock beneath its feet disintegrated into a shower of rubble. Chunks large and small plunged to the glowing waters below. The mighty tyrannid plunged, too... Almost. As the bridge fell away beneath it, it leapt powerfully, slamming its upper body into Karras’s end of the shattered bridge and scrabbling desperately against gravity. One set of talons found purchase, and it hung for a moment, clawed feet dangling in thin air above a hundred-metre drop. Then it swung another arm up and secured a better grip.

The creature, more physically powerful than any Space Marine, began hauling its heavily armoured body upwards. But, as its head cleared the lip of rock, it found itself looking up into the glowing visor-slits of Karras’s battle-helm.

There was a moment when their gazes locked, each combatant looking into the soul of the other. It was a moment Karras had known many times – that moment of shared knowledge between enemies, even across species so vastly different. It was the moment when the victory of one becomes absolute; the moment when the loser knows absolute loss, when the deadly dance is over and they stand apart, separated by inescapable, undeniable fact.

‘I win,’ said Karras coldly, voice little more than a whisper tremulous with hate.

*Arquemann* flashed downwards, once, twice, severing those clawed hands at the wrist.

The broodlord gave a long, chilling scream as it fell, a scream that Karras allowed himself to savour, if only for a moment. He didn’t stay to watch the monster hit the powerfully corrosive waters so far below. He heard the splash, but he had already turned away and was running; running as fast as his tired, aching legs could manage.

The digits on his mission chrono had turned red. Talon Squad had less than thirty minutes until the extraction deadline.

*It might just be enough*, Karras told himself as he pounded up the tunnel.

But a self-critical sneer stole over his face.

Who did he think he was he fooling?

Zeed, Solarion and Voss raced along the tunnel, plasteel support beams whipping by in the glow of bolter-mounted flashlights. The tunnel curved upwards and to the right, and soon they reached the end of it, to be greeted by a frustrated Rauth.

The Exorcist had placed the woman down. Behind him was the emergency blast door that they had muscled open hours ago.

It was shut tight.

‘They got ahead of us,’ rasped Rauth. ‘This door... It’s not designed to be opened from this side. No emergency release, no handles, nothing.’

There was the boom of an explosion from back down the tunnel.

‘At least that means the bridge is out,’ said Zeed.

‘It won’t stop them,’ said Solarion. ‘Even with the broodlord dead, they’ll be coming. They still have prey to hunt.’ He looked at the slumped woman. ‘Maybe they’ll come for what’s inside her.’

Voss slung his flamer and pushed past the others, walking straight to the door. Rauth was right. The blast door was built to be opened from the other side only, a measure intended to stop doomed and desperate men from inflicting their fate on others, be it deadly gas, a magma flood, or something else entirely.

Voss drew his knife and tried to work the blade into the crack between the heavy adamantium doors.

‘No good.’

If he could just get some kind of grip...

They heard Karras approaching fast before he burst into view, *Arquemann* still in hand, the blade still glowing from the psychic charge it had built up. It bathed the end of the tunnel in chill, white light.

‘Is it done?’ asked Rauth.

Karras nodded as he walked up to Voss’s side, eyes on the door.

‘It’s done. The broodlord has fallen. But it won’t count for anything if we can’t get back to the exfil point in the next twelve minutes. Check your chronos.’

‘I can’t open it, Scholar,’ said Voss. ‘Not without some kind of handhold.’

‘Stand back,’ Karras told the others. ‘Don’t let the blade touch you.’

They stepped away as Karras lifted the force sword above his head and made four diagonal slashes in the metal. Two heavy chunks fell away, and Voss had his

handholds at last. They weren't much, but they might just be enough.

'Let's see what you've got, Omni,' said Karras, stepping clear.

The Imperial Fist rolled his massive shoulders and stepped in. He pressed his fingers into the space Karras's blade had carved and began to pull the doors sideways.

At first, nothing happened. He threw more power into it, the servos in his armour grinding in complaint. Every muscle in his back strained near to tearing. He roared and raged, and finally a space began to appear, finger-wide at first, then wider, wider, until it was the width of his helm.

Suddenly, something black flashed out from the gap and raked his breastplate, sending out a flash of sparks. Voss fell backwards just as it swiped again. The others looked down at him and saw the two ragged tears on his breastplate.

'Genestealers!' shouted Zeed.

Rauth stepped in and pointed his gun muzzle through the gap. He fired a triple burst. There was an alien scream and the sound of frenzied movement.

Lots of movement.

Voss was on his feet again. 'Stand aside,' he told Rauth. His flamer was already in his hand, the blue igniter hissing in angry anticipation. He pushed the nozzle to the gap and loosed a blinding burst of white fire into the chamber beyond the door. The screams of burning xenos reached their ears.

'There are many,' said Karras. 'Talon, we have to get through here. There's no other way to the Inorin shaft from this side. We have less than ten minutes, brothers. We have to go straight through them.'

'Grenades,' said Voss. 'We roll everything we have through there, make some room, and sprint for the far side.'

'Approved,' said Karras, 'and Solarion, you'll crack a flare as soon as we're in. I want as much light as we can get. Rauth, take the woman and stay between the four of us. We move as a unit. Standard close-protection diamond pattern. Keep the woman safe, but do not fall behind. Cover your fire-sectors. Solarion takes front. Zeed covers the left. Voss, you'll take the rear. I'll take the right side. Keep it tight. Once we reach the tunnel mouth on the far side, move as fast as you can. Zeed, you and Solarion will move to the exfil point with Rauth. Rendezvous with Chyron and fire that damned signal round. We have to let Reaper flight know we're still in this. Voss, you'll hang back with me. Between us, we might be able to buy some time. I don't want to extract under assault.'

'I'm with you, Scholar. What about the cache on the central rooftop?'

'Unless we get hemmed in, ignore it. I don't want a standing battle. Our only

goal is the tunnel on the far side. Bless your weapons, brothers. Voss, give those vermin a little gift.'

Voss grinned beneath his helm as he primed the grenades and tossed them through the gap, one after another. There was a series of deafening cracks, accompanied by flashes of bright light and waves of searing fire, and through the gap itself, a spray of dark xenos blood.

Voss threw himself back to the task of wrenching open the adamantium doors. With the gap he had already made, Solarion and Zeed were able to help him, one on either side.

'Are you ready?' Karras demanded of Rauth.

The woman was cradled in the crook of his left arm again, so small against his massive armoured frame. He held his bolt pistol in his right hand, knowing his primary weapon would be too unwieldy to brandish one-handed at a run. It was locked to his right cuisse.

Karras couldn't help thinking how he'd rather the woman wasn't here. He suspected he would very soon need every bit of firepower the kill-team could muster.

*At least the broodlord is dead.*

'I'm always ready,' grunted Rauth.

'It's open!' Voss called out.

'Talon, move! Remember your fire-sectors. Go!'

They burst into the chamber at a run. Solarion cracked a flare and tossed it.

What they saw almost stopped them dead.

The walls, the floor, the ceiling, every walkway, stair and gantry; everything was literally crawling with tyranid life forms.

The chrono kept counting down. No amount of hoping or praying could slow it.

*00:07:34.*

*00:07:33.*

*00:07:32.*

'Open fire!' shouted Karras. 'Death to the xenos!'

But all he could think was, *More time. We needed more time.*

## 18

Bolters chugged relentlessly, their barrels growing hot. Purging flames gushed forth in a torrent, twisting side-to-side like a great dancing snake as Voss strafed the murderous ranks of the foe. Under-barrel grenade launchers coughed, their rounds detonating with lethal efficacy, carving great craters of death in the horde. The genestealers were so numerous they were almost packed shoulder to ugly misshapen shoulder. The toll on them was devastating, but they didn't care. They had numbers to spare and then some. There was no end to them. For every ten that were blasted or burned apart, twenty seemed to emerge onto the elevated gantries and walkways around the perimeter of the chamber.

The exit was cut off. It had been from the start. Karras had had no choice. He had ordered them to the rooftop where the cache was. With growing, heart-sickening despair, he watched the chrono tick down as if it was a death clock counting away the seconds until they were overwhelmed.

He couldn't let the others feel this way. It was unworthy. If they had to die, let it be glorious and noble, drowning in the blood of their enemies right up to the end.

'The Emperor is watching you!' he roared at his squad. 'Show him your worth. You are Deathwatch. Best of the best. Show him what that means. Earn honour for your Chapters. Remember your oaths!'

So they fought. They fought like gods of war. The genestealers seethed all around them, moving like an ocean, crashing against the old, frozen prefab structure on which they stood, then scrambling to the roof only to meet the wrath of Voss's flamer. At this range, the weapon was savagely effective, spewing fiery death, cutting a burning swathe through literally hundreds of the foe. But it couldn't last. Even with the additional ammo of the cache – already stripped bare – the moment would come when the last canister ran dry. Voss was ready. He would switch to his bolt pistol and knife. Standard operating protocol. But it meant Karras's plan would never see fruition. He had been meant to help the kill-team leader hold the genestealers off while the others fell back. He couldn't do that effectively with just his sidearm.

Over the link, he shouted to Karras. 'Scholar! Last canister!'

There was no answer. At first, Voss felt his heart speed up. Had the Death

Spectre fallen?

But Karras was gunning down genestealers with the others. Gunning them down and making the kind of decision only an Alpha could make.

‘All of you, down off the roof. Make for the tunnel. Move as a group, triangle formation, Rauth and the woman in the middle as before.’

‘No!’ said Zeed. ‘I’ll not leave this fight to you alone, Scholar. You plan to martyr yourself?’

‘You will do as commanded, Talon Squad!’

Balefire had begun to coruscate over his armour, the flickering tongues getting longer with each passing second, with each kill he racked up. *Arquemann* was glowing, pulsing, strapped to his back by its sling. The blade wanted free, free to slaughter enemies of the Chapter to which it belonged. Karras could feel it compelling him to mag-lock his bolter. But that was not why he was ordering the others away.

Two minutes remained on the mission chrono. It was already too late, he knew, but he wasn’t ready to believe it was over. If the others would only move clear, maybe, just maybe, he could do something to get them out of here.

‘You have to break for the tunnel now. Jump roof-to-roof until you are close. I will buy you the time you need to reach the exfil point, but you must do exactly as I say.’

‘Scholar—’

‘I’m giving you an order, Talon. Now move!’

There was no arguing with him. The tone of command in his voice was as hard as the rock all around them. But still they hesitated, and he saw that he would have to make a move himself.

‘Go!’ he shouted at them, then he ran to the edge of the roof and leapt to another, only not in the direction of the exfiltration point. He was trying to draw some of the genestealers in the other direction.

‘Don’t make me do this for nothing!’ he snarled at them.

‘Let’s move, Talon,’ barked Rauth. ‘I need cover. Let’s go!’

With a last glance at Karras, beset on all sides now by clambering, slavering terrors, the rest of the squad broke from the central roof and headed west to the exit, gunning down and burning all those genestealers unlucky enough to draw near.

Behind them, Karras emptied round after round into chitin-ribbed bodies and hideous, razor-mawed faces. He fired grenades into the densest knots. The kill-count was staggering, and it kept rising, but he was soon down to his last

magazine.

Then the trigger clicked that fateful click every warrior dreads in the middle of a conflict – the last round was spent, the mag was empty. He unslung *Arquemann* from his back and gripped it two-handed, as it was meant to be held. Eldritch lightning began arcing between his body and the blade, bright white, bright enough to sear afterimages on the eyes.

The genestealers around him hesitated, sensing the lethal nature of the weapon, its touch utterly deadly. But there were so many pressing at their backs, they could not hold themselves clear. Like a great crashing tide, they surged towards him again.

Karras felt power racing through every fibre of his body. ‘You have underestimated me, alien filth!’ he bellowed. ‘And now you will learn to fear the power of the sons of Occludus!’

The cavern filled with great bolts of lightning. The air shook. Dying creatures screamed as their life force was ripped away from them, their bodies hewn to pieces.

At the far side of the chamber, the rest of Talon Squad had dropped from the roof of the block closest to the exit and had cut a path out through the foe.

Solarion ran in front, point-man as ever. Rauth was just two metres behind him, and behind Rauth came Zeed and Voss. As they bolted up the tunnel with all the speed they could manage, Voss chanced a single, brief glance backwards, looking for the kill-team leader.

He couldn’t quite see him. He couldn’t quite make sense of what he *did* see. It was so bright back there, his helm’s optics struggled to compensate. But he thought he saw hundreds of writhing forms suspended in the air while a figure clad in raging, blinding flame threw great spears of deadly energy out in all directions. Everything those spears of light touched burst into swirls of ash.

There was no time to witness anything more. The others were already pulling ahead.

Voss turned back to them and put on a burst of speed.

The exfiltration point was just up ahead.

But did it even matter any more?

After all, the chrono had stopped counting down minutes ago.

Now, all it read was --:--:--.

## 19

The exfiltration point looked like a scene from Gaudoleri's famed triptych *Aftermath at Hades*. The circular expanse of the room was awash with blood, littered with the broken bodies of the dead. Four members of Talon Squad – Zeed, Voss, Solarion and Rauth – skidded into the echoing chamber and stopped, their lips forming grim lines behind their visors. They could not see their sixth member at all in this reeking mess. The chamber floor was tacky with cooling crimson. The nearest bodies looked like they had been ripped to pieces. Others nearer the far walls looked like they had been burned in flames or chewed apart by large rounds. Against one wall, more lay in a great mound.

But of Chyron himself, there was no sign.

Before anyone could comment, they heard footfalls from the tunnel behind them, and Karras entered at a tired, staggering run. *Arquemann* was once again slung on his back. When he stopped running, he collapsed to the ground on hands and armoured knees. There were deep gouges, tears and a spidery network of fracture lines all across his armour. His right vambrace had shattered completely. Only the metal frame and black layer of artificial muscle remained.

He was gasping in pain.

Zeed was closest to him. The Raven Guard dropped to his haunches at Karras's side.

'In the name of the primarch, Scholar, I don't know how you did it, but I wish I could've stuck around to watch. Are you wounded?'

Karras, wordless at first, waved him off, then struggled to his feet. His entire body ached. It felt like there was fire in his bones and grinding glass in his brain. It was the second time only in a long life of war that he had been forced to exercise his power like that – not just in the purging of the foe with psychic fire, but also, once he had reached the chamber exit, to collapse the tunnel between here and RP1. It wasn't much, but it would stop the genestealers from harassing them for a while...

... until they circled around and found another way in.

It was dangerous, this excessive use of a power that flowed from the warp of all places. In his head, he had heard the mutterings of inhuman voices, hungry and excited, watching him with gleeful anticipation for the moment he lost

control. Those sounds were not something he ever wished to hear again.

‘Chyron?’ he asked the others.

‘No sign,’ said Solarion, ‘apart from this bloodbath. He must have pulled out at the last minute.’

Karras hoped the old warrior had indeed extracted on time. It made sense.

*The rest of us... We all made it back alive. But for what, I wonder?*

He had blinked off his chrono display. It was pointless now, just a row of dashes and colons that seemed to say *You Have Failed* more than anything else.

He crossed to the circular space beneath the Inorin vent shaft – the very shaft down which they had infiltrated just over ten hours ago – and looked upwards. At the top, he could make out a tiny circle of starlit space. *Ten hours*. He felt so drained. It was not so much a physical exhaustion – Space Marines could operate at extremes for days on end if need be – but the strain of first suppressing then almost constantly exercising his unique abilities, which had left him close to his mental limits. That last battle had pushed him beyond them. He needed nutriment and a long, unbroken rest.

*And a book*, he thought. *An ancient, worthy tome in which to lose myself awhile.*

‘I knew this would happen, Karras,’ Solarion griped, pulling off his helm. ‘If we hadn’t wasted so much time back–’

The kill-team leader’s patience was spent. ‘Kill it, Three!’ he barked harshly. ‘It was always going to be tight. Sigma was unrealistic in his assessment. The broodlord was always going to become a factor.’

Voss, largely ignoring the back-and-forth, had seen something of note among the bodies. He walked over to it and picked it up. ‘Now *that* explains a lot.’

He was holding the severed end of Sigma’s communications relay cable.

‘Burned straight through. It must have taken a las- or plasma-blast during Chyron’s little skirmish. I guess he was already engaging the enemy while we were crossing the lake.’

Solarion had been glaring daggers at Karras, but he, like the kill-team leader, didn’t have the necessary energy left to keep anger ablaze. ‘So what do we do now? For all we know, the *Saint Nevarre* is already heading out of the system.’

‘We have Sigma’s package,’ Karras grated, gesturing at the woman cradled in Rauth’s left arm. ‘And we’re only minutes late. I don’t think he’ll have given up on us quite yet. Reaper flight may still be in range. The signal round, if you please, brother.’

With some small hope rekindled, the Ultramarine drew a uniquely coloured

bolt from his webbing. It was red with white banding. He detached the magazine from under his bolter, pulled the cocking lever back, slid the signal round into the breech and primed it. Then he lifted the bolter vertically, sighted upwards through the mounted scope, squeezed on the trigger and loosed the round.

A second later, the sound of the bolt detonating above the planet's surface returned to them. There was a flash of bluish white light on the chamber floor, perfectly circular, shaped by the vent shaft under which Talon Squad stood.

'So we wait,' said Zeed, 'and hope she's as important to him as we think she is.'

'There's the city, Cholixe, eighty-three kilometres west of here,' Voss replied. 'If it comes down to it, we can make for there. They have a small space port and a subsector comms array.'

Karras looked at the woman again. 'She won't last another hour. Omni, if there's no response to the signal round, do you think you could do something with that relay cable?'

'I don't have the tools to patch in from here, Scholar. I'd need to fix an I/O jack to the end of it before I could do anything else.'

'So, we have to depend on the signal round,' said Zeed.

'If there's no response from Reaper flight within twenty minutes,' said Karras, 'we will grant White Phoenix the Emperor's Mercy, kill the parasite, and make for Cholixe.'

The others nodded silent agreement. All were thinking that the genestealer horde might find a way through to them by then. Zeed, unsatiated even now, actively hoped it.

'Such butchery,' murmured Solarion, looking at the bodies by his feet. 'At least he enjoyed himself in our absence.'

'They were a welcome diversion, Ultramarine,' rumbled a voice, basso profundo, 'from the boredom of awaiting you.'

The hill of corpses against the chamber wall began to shudder and shift. Dead meat slid away. There was the noise of skulls smacking on stone, the slap of lifeless flesh. Chyron rose awkwardly from beneath the pile and turned his slot-visored glacia plate to face them.

'A little hide-and-peek, Old One?'

Chyron began dragging himself towards the middle of the chamber, and the rest of the kill-team could see just how badly damaged he was. His left leg was a mess, its armour shattered, the pistons and actuators beneath twisted and snagged. His foot made showers of bright yellow sparks as he dragged it along

the ground. His right arm was in an even worse state, for almost nothing of the assault cannon remained. All over his chassis his tank-thick armour was gouged, scored, chipped and burned in too many places to count.

He pre-empted their next question.

‘Man-portable missile launchers,’ he growled. ‘The dung-eating cowards fired on me from the shadows, then swarmed on me like ants. And they died like ants – brainwashed men and xenos-bred abominations both.’

At this, the other Deathwatch operatives took a better look at the dead. There were literally hundreds of them, but finding bodies which had not been pulped beyond recognition by the Lamentor’s power fist or burned to cinders by his flamer was far from easy. For the most part, Chyron’s attackers were, in physical form at least, men like any others. The majority wore miners’ overalls and orange thermasuits. Others yet wore the dark uniform and body armour of Civitas enforcers. But there were others, too, and these last were not so much like men. They were taller, boasted larger frames, and those frames were twisted with xenos corruption. Some had extra limbs. Others had sharp triangular teeth peeking out from within their slack mouths. To a Space Marine’s eyes, even the relative darkness of the chamber could not hide the unnatural colouring of their skin. These were the tainted by-blows of the genestealer infection, and Chyron had left none here alive.

‘Quite a body count,’ said Voss.

‘Would that the diversion had lasted longer,’ returned Chyron. ‘Is there anything left to kill down here?’

‘Genestealers,’ said Voss. ‘Leaderless now, thanks to Scholar, but they’ll be coming. You may yet have more killing to do.’

‘That would be some compensation,’ said Chyron. ‘I tried to call in the Stormravens via the link when the chrono dropped to five minutes. I wondered why there was no response.’

‘Why did you hide under those corpses?’ asked Zeed.

Chyron snorted derisively. ‘Use your head, little raven. I was left with only my power fist. Would you have me stand here in the middle of the chamber where our enemies could fire missiles on me from a safe distance? I had hoped to ambush more of them as they walked among their dead. But it seemed there were no others to come. Or perhaps they did not want to die.’ After a pause he asked, ‘Is that the primary objective? That sickly woman? She looks all but dead herself.’

Rauth was still holding her, but it was Zeed who answered. ‘I doubt it’s the

woman herself that Sigma wants.’ He looked with distaste at the shifting swollen skin of her belly. It suddenly occurred to him that Chyron, whose Chapter had been all but obliterated by the tyrannid race, might recognise she was heavy with forbidden progeny and strike at the woman in a flash of vengeful rage. His power fist would kill both her and her unborn parasite in a single blow. He stepped in front of Rauth, blocking her from view as nonchalantly as possible.

Chyron watched the Raven Guard do this without comment, but he was no fool. He perceived the cause of Zeed’s concern, and searched himself for the fury his brother suspected might rise. It wasn’t there. In truth, the sight of the woman was so pathetic that it had not occurred to him to strike her and her unborn parasite down. Instead, he rumbled, ‘The Inquisition has strange needs. Whatever business they are about this time, they are welcome to it. Give me war, plain and simple, and to the warp with all their intrigues.’

At the mention of Inquisition business, Karras caught Zeed throwing him a meaningful look. He was about to question it when a tinny voice on the link stopped him.

‘Reaper One to Alpha. Reaper One to Alpha. Signal round sighted. Better late than never, Talon. We are en route to your location. ETA two minutes. Prep for extraction.’

‘Throne and sword!’ gasped Solarion. There was no mistaking his relief and joy.

‘Praise the Emperor,’ added Voss. He and Zeed gripped wrists in mutual congratulation.

‘Descended they, from the high heavens, upon wings of fire and steel,’ quoted Rauth quietly. ‘And lifted were our hearts, and we called them e’er after our salvation.’

Karras didn’t recognise that one. Half his mind was occupied by something else. A compulsion of sorts had come over him. He looked at Chyron and made a decision, though he would not understand why until later. Something inside him, a feeling not quite his own, told him that Chyron must not be the last member of the kill-team left in the chamber. Though he could find no logical basis to support that thought, as a psyker, he had learned to trust his instincts in moments like these.

‘Alpha to Reaper One. Talon Six will be extracted first. Instruct Reaper Two. Reaper Three will hang back. There are no retrievable support assets. Confirm.’

‘Negative, Alpha,’ said the flight-group leader. ‘We have orders to extract the package first.’

‘Reaper flight, Alpha reminds you that you are addressing one of the Emperor’s own Space Marines. You will do as I command or face the consequences. Talon Six will be extracted first. Acknowledge.’

There was a moment of tense silence before the pilot replied resignedly, ‘Understood, Alpha. Reaper Two moving into position now. Stand by for magna-grapple drop.’

Moments later, the battle-ravaged bulk of Chyron was winched out of sight, vanishing up the long, echoing vent-shaft. Even once he disappeared, Karras could still hear Chyron grumbling and growling about the indignity of being hauled up like a fish on a line.

Reaper Two moved off. Reaper One swung into position and dropped four lines, one of which ended in a body-sized recovery frame of black plasteel. Into this frame, the Space Marines strapped the limp form of White Phoenix. She was still breathing, but the movements of the parasite had increased. She did not have the luxury of time.

The kill-team watched her ascend after Karras gave Reaper One the all-clear to pull her up. Then Solarion, Rauth and Voss each mag-locked their weapons, placed a booted foot into the loop at the bottom of each of the three lines, voxed for the winches to start reeling them up, and began their own rapid climb to the gunship hovering overhead.

Zeed and Karras stood at the bottom, looking up.

‘Before we get back to the *Saint Nevarre* and that bastard inquisitor, there’s something I think you should know, Scholar,’ said the Raven Guard.

Karras looked at him, surprised by the tone. ‘I’m listening.’

‘Back in the xenos nest, after the horde broke away to hunt you and Watcher, something caught my eye. There was a cave deep at the back. I noticed it when I was clearing out the last of the genestealers. I took a quick look.’

‘And?’ asked Karras.

‘Talon Two, Three and Four are aboard,’ reported Reaper One. ‘What’s that? Alpha, please hold. We’re having some kind of trouble with the lines.’

Zeed continued. ‘There were several pods there, made of metal. No chitin. These were not tyrannid things. They looked more like one-man boarding torpedoes – a diamonite drill for a nose and all the hallmarks of human construction. Big enough for genestealers, Scholar. In fact, when I looked inside, there were marks consistent with genestealers having broken out from within.’ The silence that followed his words was thick and heavy with unspoken implications.

A single line dropped down the shaft now. The slack hit the floor in front of them.

‘Some kind of trouble with the winches, Alpha,’ voxed Reaper One. ‘Damned strange. We’ve had to drop a manual line. You and Five will need to pull yourselves up.’

Karras ordered Zeed to go first. ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

But Zeed wasn’t finished talking. He moved to the rope and grabbed it, but there he stopped and asked, ‘You see it, don’t you?’

*I see it*, thought Karras sourly. *The Inquisition. The Ordo Xenos.*

The genestealer infestation on Chiaro had been deliberate, engineered by men against men. But, in the name of Holy Terra, why?

‘They’ll burn this place out,’ continued Zeed, tugging the line to make sure it was secure. ‘The mines are almost dry now anyway. It must be why they chose this planet. They won’t wait long once we’re gone. They can’t afford the truth getting out. No one else is getting off this rock. Not after us.’

‘Exterminatus,’ murmured Karras to himself. The word carried a chill all of its own. A whole world purged of life. Extreme, but what other recourse was there, he supposed, when the civilian population was infected with genestealer taint? It could be rooted out no other way, and it was far too dangerous to risk the chance, even remote, that it might get off-world somehow.

He thought of the woman they had worked so hard to recover, and of the alien creature readying to tear its way out of her womb. Would he ever know why it had been so important to retrieve her? Would he ever know exactly how he and his team had served the Emperor’s Will? They had risked their lives, stood on the edge of the abyss and faced their end. Did they not deserve to know? And if Karras ever did discover why, would he feel it justified that a whole planet would pay the price for the games the Inquisition had played here?

That seemed unlikely.

‘Say no more on this, Ghost. For now, at least. I’ve a feeling Sigma monitors all we say and do. Nowhere on the *Saint Nevarre* is secure. For now, just keep your eyes and ears open. Even the best surgeon makes occasional mistakes. Sigma had best be careful lest he get cut by his own scalpel one day.’

‘Count on it, Scholar.’

The Raven Guard began his climb, his own muscles working in perfect concert with the tireless artificial fibre-bundles beneath his ceramite plate. Within moments, he was high above Karras, and now the kill-team leader gripped the rope and began his own climb. He was only slightly slower than the Raven

Guard, but then nobody moved quite as fast as Siefer Zeed.

Karras had pulled himself some fifteen metres from the ground, and was just about to pass beyond the lower lip of the vent shaft when, suddenly, he stopped. He felt something sharp, bitter, pricking at his psychic awareness; a sense of something deeply wrong. It was only the briefest instant, but in that instant, he knew his sense of victory back at RP2 had been premature.

There was a rushing of air from below. Something powerful grasped his armoured ankle and, with terrifying physical force, hauled him from the rope.

Karras fell two metres and crashed into his attacker. The clip on his webbing cinched tight, arresting a further fall.

He whipped his head around to see the broodlord glaring up at him, spitting and twitching violently as it clung to the rope just below him. The fall into margonite-infused waters had not killed it, but immersion in that dangerous and corrosive solution had melted its flesh horribly and given it an unearthly white glow. Gleaming bone poked out between ragged gaps in the creature's scorched flesh. The stumps where Karras had severed two of its wrists were horribly burned and withered. The other pair of arms, however, still with their sharp-clawed, five-fingered hands, were very much intact and still every bit as lethal.

Releasing its grip on the rope with one of these hands, the beast batted savagely at Karras, once, twice. He spun wildly. His weapons were knocked away and plummeted to clatter hard on the stone of the chamber floor below – all but his combat knife, sheathed on his right greave. *Arquemann's* strap was severed by the beast's second strike. Karras felt the force sword spin away from him and turned to see where it fell. The blade struck the floor point-first and lodged itself deep and hard in the stone. Karras's hearts sank. He knew his talents would not be able to call the blade back to his hand. Not now.

'Scholar,' shouted Zeed from further up the rope.

The Raven Guard had reversed his climb. He was moving downwards again.

The broodlord lunged, attempting to pass Karras completely and grasp the rope above him, and Karras realised with a start that it did not simply want to kill them all. It was attempting to retrieve the body of the woman. It wanted the unborn thing inside her.

But, as the ruined creature leapt past him, Karras grabbed it and grappled with it, desperate to prevent its ascent. The accursed alien was still physically stronger by far, despite its dreadful wounds. It thrashed and struggled, and beat at Karras with the disfigured limbs that could not clutch the rope.

Karras saw no other option. Right here, right now, he had but a single chance

to ensure the mission's success. The cost would be great, but the Black River claimed all in the end – even those who had returned before from its furious astral waters.

With a roar of defiance, he drew his combat knife, stretched up and, gripping the broodlord tight with his other arm, cut the rope with a single hard slash.

Together, they tumbled backwards, plunging to cold, hard rock.

The monster screamed in rage. It was a scream that cut off abruptly when the ground leapt up to strike them both. The impact was brutal. Karras grunted, felt bones shatter. His knife skittered away. Even power armour couldn't protect him completely from a fall like that.

Pain surged through him. Warning glyphs flashed red on his left retina. His right eye was blind. He didn't know why. Several of his armour's subsystems were non-functional. Main systems and motor controls were reporting progressive drops in efficiency. The suit's joints were starting to lock up.

Heavy footfalls – clawed toes on blood-slicked stone – sounded near Karras's head. He looked up with one eye.

The beast stood over him, trembling in rage and pain.

*Just one more hideous terror in a galaxy filled with them,* thought Karras. *It is not your destiny to rule, monster. Only man can rise above his bestial instincts. Only man can ascend to a higher state of consciousness. For man alone, there is hope of salvation. That is why you and your kind will lose. Always. The future belongs to man.*

The tyrannid broodlord crouched over him and raised its clawed hands, ready to rip his armour open like foil and tear the organs from his flesh.

Karras had little life left in him, but he fought back with the only weapon that remained in reach.

He let the power of the immaterium flow through him.

White balefire rose from his body. It flared across his battered armour, and he bent all his will towards the destruction of the beast that was standing over him.

The air crackled with all that ethereal power. Karras heard voices taunting him, voices from the warp, the dark domain from which his power flowed. It was always a risk, always had been, but he was ready for that. He had been trained for it. He cast his inner gates wide and let more of the power flow through him. He turned his mind to the mantras with which the mighty Athio Cordatus had taught him to protect himself.

The broodlord staggered, buffeted by the rising psychic surge. Immediately, the monster turned to its own powerful gifts and battle was joined between the

two one last time.

Dimly, Karras could hear voices calling to him on the link, but it was no good. There was nothing they could do for him now. They had the package. They had to get away while the broodlord was held here. Success had a price. Today, the price was his life, as he had always known it would one day be.

The ground beneath the two bitter enemies began to shudder. The stone floor started to crack and chip. Small loose rocks began rising up into the air, lifted on currents of psychic fire. Dust and dirt began to rain down in great drifts from fresh cracks in the chamber's domed ceiling and in the lip of the vent shaft.

Karras sensed a surge in the broodlord's power, fuelled by raw animal rage. The resonance of the unborn xenos parasite was moving away from their location. Reaper One was withdrawing. The broodlord had lost. *Operation Night Harvest*, whatever its true purpose might be, had come to a close. Talon Squad had succeeded.

Now it was time to end this properly, and there was only one way left.

'I die in battle,' Karras spat at the creature. 'And in so doing, earn my rebirth.'

He opened the gates of his mind as wide as he could, far further than he had even risked before. The flow of power was a crashing, raging tide now. The mocking voices from the warp grew louder, closer. The ground beneath him shook as if caught in the middle of a massive seismic cataclysm.

'We die here together, xenos filth,' roared Karras, 'but of the two, only I will live again!'

Great, lethal chunks of rock began to tumble from the ceiling, smashing into the ground to shatter with all the force that weight and gravity could muster.

The beast fought back, its own power rising to meet the flow of Karras's own, strength for strength.

Karras could channel no more. He gave himself over completely to the power that flowed through him, hoping it would be enough. He felt unseen things closing on him from a great distance, but their speed was immeasurably high. He prayed that he and the broodlord would die before his soul was forfeit.

The thick ceiling of the chamber gave a great heave above them and collapsed completely. Absolute finality tumbled towards the locked combatants, thousands of tonnes of sharp black rock spinning end-over-end. Karras loosed a final, raw-throated shout:

'I fear not death, I who—'

He didn't finish it.

Silence.

No more chattering voices to drive him mad. No more crashing surge of psychic power testing the limits of his strength and sanity. Nothing.

Just silence.

Silence and pain.

Karras knew death when he felt it. He had embodied it for over a century. He had passed through its dark veil to prove himself worthy of the name Death Spectre. And now he felt it rage through his system, all white fire and black ice, at once burning and freezing his flesh to the deepest core. His plate armour was pierced and torn, the claws of the frenzied tyranid abomination more than equal to the task of ripping a full suit of Space Marine power armour to pieces. One of his hearts – his primary – was all but demolished, and his secondary heart, the organ known as the *Maintainer*, struggled to keep him alive while so much of his blood ran free. Great sticky pools of dark red welled up from the jagged rents in his ceramite shell. The blood itself was far from normal. Even now, the powerful coagulants it contained allowed it to clot, sealing wounds that should have killed him already. But it was too late. Karras had buried himself and the tyranid broodlord in an impossibly deep grave. Here they would lie, tangled in death. But that was all right. To Karras, even this was a victory. He had taken his foe with him. This abomination, at least, would threaten the Imperium no more.

*Ah, I hear them. I hear the waters around me now.*

His consciousness pulled free of his ruined body and slid beyond the physical world into that familiar passage which led to the next. It was the Black River. All around him, the great cylinder of dark water surged and splashed. He felt it pulling him.

The broodlord had no presence here.

*Of course, it doesn't. As if such a blight on reality could possess a soul!*

But there *was* something else here. As Karras was pulled along by the surging currents of the Black River, he became aware of something vast and powerful shifting into his reality from somewhere else. Dread filled him. He had sensed such a presence the last time he had died. Across a century, the memory of that battle on the edge of oblivion returned to him. This thing, this new presence, had

the same foul air of that other, and yet this one was far more powerful. Karras knew at once, as the thing began to materialise before him, that here was an enemy he could not overcome.

Its voice, when it finally addressed him, was the voice of a great multitude surrounding him on all sides. The dark waters themselves grew agitated at the sound. Everything seemed to shake and judder, and the pain Karras thought he had left behind with his ruined physical body came suddenly back to him, only now magnified many times with each word the dark being spoke.

‘Lyandro Karras,’ it hummed and cracked. ‘First Codicier of the Death Spectres. Son of Occludus. How exquisite your pain!’

It laughed, and the sound was like a thousand burning needles thrusting into one’s flesh.

‘Would that I could linger to enjoy it,’ the presence continued. ‘But I did not breach the boundaries of time and space and interfere in your escape merely to take pleasure in your torment. A greater prize I seek, and nothing else will content me.’

Karras could make little of this. The words themselves were agony to him. He tried to will himself past the being, to be swept swiftly into the eternal Afterworld by the raging waters of the tunnel, but he was fixed firm, and no amount of psychic struggle could free him. He tried to fix his awareness on the dark form now hovering before him, but he could hardly look at it. Something almost physical and utterly irresistible forced his senses away every time.

He did manage to get a sense of the thing, though it made little true sense at all.

Three faces. Five horns. Seven wings. All black as a moonless, starless night. The black of the void.

The being laughed again, revelling in the inability of the human mind to comprehend both its power and its form.

‘You are not dead yet, Lyandro Karras,’ the terrible voice said. ‘Even now, your physical form fights to remain alive. Will you rise again? Ah, you may just. Only, when you do, you will carry a message for me, for there is one known to you who owes me a debt – a very great debt indeed.’

Karras railed at this lunacy. He was no messenger of daemons. Better that he die once and for all. Let the Black River sweep him away right now. ‘I shall carry no message for the likes of you,’ he hissed. ‘Release me or destroy my soul completely, but you will have nothing from me!’

The being squeezed close around him, and Karras’s mind howled with fresh

agony.

‘You *will* carry this message, Librarian, or I will bring a doom on your beloved Chapter that you can scarcely imagine. Centuries of agony and dishonour, I will rain down on them. They will not escape my wrath for a second. It will not begin today, of course. What is doom without a little anticipation, after all? Let it take a decade to begin. Perhaps even longer. But it will come, a fate so black that their name will be expunged from the records, and it shall be on your head.’

‘Empty words, daemon,’ spat Karras.

‘You know better,’ replied the presence. ‘There is much the Death Spectres endeavour to keep secret. But it is not so secret as you think. So, you will deliver this message for me, or I will deliver your oh-so-venerable brotherhood into misery, torment and eternal damnation.’

Karras howled in anger and pain. ‘I deny you! The words of Chaos sit only on the tongues of liars and traitors. You know nothing. Emperor of Man, deliver me unto silent oblivion. Cut me free from this monstrosity!’

The daemon delighted in this. Its laugh was so deep and potent that it distorted even the shape of the Black River, stretching it here, compressing it there, so that it flexed and strained such as Karras had never seen it do before. There could be no greater testament to the power of this entity. And then it said something that robbed Karras of any confidence he had left.

‘The Shariax,’ it gloated. ‘Such a burden to those who sit upon it.’

Karras fought to stay silent, though a screaming denial echoed in his mind.

‘Even now, its power leeches life from your beloved Chapter Master. So it has been with all the First Spectres. Foolish Corcaedus. There is a great price to be paid for sitting on the Glass Throne. Yet the Death Spectres are ever willing to pay it, terrible as it is. And all because of the vision that drove your founder to the very border of madness!’

*How can it know this?* thought Karras. *Occludus is protected. No daemon could have manifested on such sacred ground. We would have known.*

‘What would the Inquisition do, I wonder, on learning of the Shariax? What would your vaunted Lords of Terra think?’ Again, it laughed and the sound was a raw, oozing malevolence pressing in on Karras’s mind, smothering it, choking it. ‘So you *will* carry my message, Lyandro Karras. You will carry it, or we shall discover the terrible power of a secret revealed.’

Karras said nothing. He could find no words. His mind spun. There could be no compact with this abhorrent thing. He could not stain his soul. Far better he were unmade entirely, wiped from existence as if he had never been. But hoping

for such was futile. Here he was, and he could do nothing to change it.

*Naught but hope for final death. Then, at least, the role of messenger will not fall to me.*

The daemon read his thoughts.

‘No,’ it said simply. ‘You shall not die. I have already apportioned some part of my power to sustain you. My strength supplements your own, fuelling your recovery. And I have compelled others, your fellows, to seek you out. They dig even now.’ Again, that laugh, so painful, like splashes of acid on open wounds. ‘Ever after, you shall owe your survival to me, Librarian. Let the knowledge burn inside you until you do as I have asked.’

Karras could stand no more of this. His sanity was at breaking point. If he lost it, fragile as it currently was, he would be open to full possession. ‘Speak your damned message and be gone, warp abomination. I will deliver it or I will not, but speak it now and free me, curse you!’

‘Then listen well, insect, for such you are to me. You will tell that treacherous Exorcist cur, Darrion Rauth, that I have forgotten neither him nor his debt. You will tell him this: I will not be denied. What is owed me shall be paid in full. I, Hepaxammon, Prince of Sorrows, will *not* be denied!’

With these last words, the daemon’s rage was so great that Karras almost lost himself completely. Countless inner voices invaded his mind, overwhelming it, repeating over and over and over, ‘Hepaxammon will not be denied!’

He felt himself diminish, felt his identity, his very consciousness, being drowned out, eroded, burned away. He struggled to grasp hold of it, repeating to himself the mantra that had defined so much of his life – his Chapter’s motto:

*I fear not death, I who embody it in His name.*

*I fear not death, I who embody it in His name.*

*I fear not death...*

‘...you who embody it in His name!’ boomed a fresh voice. It was powerful, all-consuming, almost like that of the daemon Hepaxammon, but this was a single voice, not a multitude, and each word pulsed with soft white light that burned away Karras’s agony. Each word muffled the dreadful sound of the daemon’s many voices. Muffled them until there were none left at all.

Then something most unlikely intruded over all else.

Karras heard the clapping of pinion feathers.

Something small and black shot straight across Karras's field of awareness and struck the daemon's form dead-centre. There was no roar, no howl of rage or indignation, no time for anything like that. In the span of an instant, Karras saw both Hepaxammon and the Black River freeze and shatter as if everything around him were nothing more than a painting on a great sheet of glass. Light blinded him for a moment, but the sound of the beating of wings continued, fading gradually as the source moved off into the distance. When Karras was no longer blinded, he turned his attention in the direction of the sound and saw a black crow disappear over a snow-covered hill.

*The cemetery on Occludus!*

The sound of the bird's passage diminished to nothing, to be replaced by footsteps crunching in snow. Karras turned.

'Be at ease, khajar. There is little time, and things you must hear.'

Karras was stunned. Stunned and confused.

Athio Cordatus stopped a few metres in front of him and smiled. He was clad in full Terminator armour, but adorned for ceremonial purposes rather than battle. Purity seals fluttered in a wind Karras could not feel. The Chief Librarian's honours, cast in gold, silver and precious gems, glittered in the watery winter sunlight of a late afternoon that could not possibly exist here and now.

Karras knew he was in a mindscape, knew his corporeal form still lay in a grave of thick black rubble back on Chiaro.

Cordatus, it seemed, knew it too.

'Since you are seeing me here, Lyandro,' he said, his smile dropping, 'it is clear that the prime future in which you lie dying beneath the rock of a collapsed mine has come to pass. For you it is the present, and no doubt it seems dark indeed. You have suffered grievous wounds. Would that it were otherwise, my khajar, but take comfort if you can. For all your suffering, we have ample reason to be glad. You will live. And it is on this path alone that the Chapter's greatest hope lies. I could say nothing of this before without affecting the future. Sharing this knowledge now, however, will not close the path you must continue to walk. Had things gone any other way... Well, that hardly matters now. What matters is

the going forward. And that is why I have constructed this,' here he gestured to the scene around them, 'so that I might still guide you, though the void of space stretches wide between us.'

Cordatus indicated that Karras should walk with him, and Karras fell into step, dwarfed even at his significant height by the towering bulk of the Terminator armour. It all seemed so real, at least to his visual senses. Here, it seemed, he still had full binocular vision. Each fallen snowflake glittered just as it should. The graves poked from the thick white layer just as he remembered, slabs of black stone inscribed with that ancient script which no one alive could read. But the absence of smells or sensations kept Karras supremely conscious of the ethereal nature of the event.

Could it all be a trick? A vile trap set by Hepaxammon?

*No. This is my khadit. I can feel it. I would know.*

Almost as if reading him, Cordatus continued, 'The daemon's involvement was something we did not foresee until recently, and the significance of its attention towards you is, as yet, unknown to us. Time is fickle about what it chooses to reveal. You know this. The workings of Chaos have always been hard to read. Nevertheless, the daemon may have its part to play, for good or ill. As of yet, we cannot know. What we do know is this: you will survive. Much work will be needed to restore you, but the inquisitor to whom you are bound, this so-called Sigma, has resources far beyond most. And despite everything, he will want to keep you in his service. He has ambitions of his own, and his psychic coven has pierced the veils and seen hints of your importance to his goals. We cannot perceive those goals. The futures that reveal them are clouded and distorted. We think this is deliberate. Regardless, he will not discharge you from your duties. This is imperative.

'I can give no further detail now without closing futures we must keep open, my khajar, but there will come a moment when Sigma's ambitions and the most desperate hopes of the Chapter will align. Nothing compares in importance to this. Difficult though it may be, do not take too much licence with this man. His tolerance has its limits. Stretch it as you will, but do not break it. As to your new brothers, keep them close. They are your strength. They will see to it that *Arquemann* is recovered. You will need the blade again before long. It, too, has a part to play.'

Karras had questions, all too many of them, but his words, he knew, would be futile. The notion that this was, in any way, a real conversation was false. Cordatus's spirit was not here. This was a construct in every sense, placed along

this timeline somewhere in the past in the hope that Karras would live long enough, and make the right choices necessary, to discover it.

Cordatus stopped walking and reached out an armour-plated hand to Karras's shoulder. Karras turned to face him.

‘Your brothers and I at Logopol continue to scry with all the power at our disposal, Lyandro. Even the Megir has turned some of his power towards your prime futures. So much is still hidden, but what we have seen thus far gives us great hope – the first real hope the Chapter has had in millennia. The Cadash is real. The Great Resurrection is closer than ever. I never dared to imagine it might come in our lifetime.’

Karras couldn't restrain himself at this.

‘The Great Resurrection? Truly, it comes?’

Cordatus, of course, did not hear. He was not really there. Instead, he smiled warmly down at his protégé and said, ‘It is no small effort to seed your future with such moments as this, Lyandro. There are risks to both of us. Grave risks. The accidental creation of a single major paradox could undo everything. Thus, these visits together will, by necessity, be few. But where I can, I shall do my best to guide you further wherever the moment demands. For now, though...’

He reached out to Karras, and they both looked down at the powerful armoured hand extended there in the space between them.

‘Take it. Take my hand.’

His voice had changed, suddenly and completely. It was not Athio Cordatus.

‘Come on, Scholar! Take my hand. Grab on.’

*Scholar? When did my khadit ever...?*

Bright light exploded in his vision, driving out the snowy mindscape. Karras felt sharp ocular pain. He blinked and tried to turn away. Slowly the pain left him. He blinked again. His right eye was blind after all, but the gene-boosted pupil of the other adjusted quickly.

He saw an armoured hand extended towards him. His eyes moved up the arm to a pauldron embossed with ancient script and a familiar skull motif. He tracked left a little and saw the muzzle of a helmet. Another hand rose and pulled the helmet off to reveal a broad, smiling face, deeply lined and scarred, but friendly and open.

‘Omni?’ groaned Karras. His throat and lungs felt like they were filled with sharp gravel.

The Imperial Fist beamed down at him.

‘Welcome back from the dead, Scholar. You're a hard bastard to kill.’

## EPILOGUE

The oil lamps flickered, but no shadows danced. Two figures regarded each other across the table of polished wood, hooded, masked in shadow, almost a perfect reflection of each other. Always the same two figures. Always the same room, the same simple furnishings, none of it real save the two minds that came to meet, to confer in secret, transported to this mindscape by the life-sapping efforts of their respective astropathic choirs.

‘The report says he will recover,’ said one. ‘Fully?’

‘My chief medic believes he will require certain augmetics,’ answered the other. ‘But, if we can get him back to Damaroth quickly, he should be able to return to operational status. The apothecarion there boasts cellular regeneration facilities beyond anything else in the Imperium.’

‘Ah. The captured eldar machines.’

‘It will take time. The damage was great. All reason says he should have died.’

‘Perhaps you underestimated him.’

‘You know me better than that. There is something else at play here, but it eludes me.’

‘Not for long, I’m sure. And the rest of this Talon Squad, they performed as expected?’

‘Predictable to the letter. Underneath it all, Space Marines are cut from one cloth. They do so long to be heroes. Honour and glory constantly cloud their judgement. Their distrust of me remains palpable, but I don’t believe they fathom the true extent of Ordo involvement in the Chiaro situation. Their oaths will hold.’

‘Good. Keep pushing them. If they really are the ones we need, they will have to endure far more than they did during *Night Harvest*. As to your former interrogator, it is well that she survives. A rare opportunity for us. I had thought to receive only the infant, but the survival of the mother is a tremendous bonus. We must keep her alive after the birth. Once she is stabilised and properly conditioned to our needs, it will be fascinating to see how her offspring responds to her in a Geller-shielded environment. My congratulations. *Blackseed* has borne the very fruit we hoped for. This could not have gone better, old friend. We will have our answers and, perhaps in time, we may have the greatest

weapon our Ordo could ever hope to wield.’

‘Her stasis pod will be transferred to your frigate as instructed. We expect to reach the transfer coordinates in three weeks.’

‘My people will be waiting. And then to Damaroth, yes?’

‘Talon Squad will be split up and assigned to one-man operations while their Alpha recovers. I shall deploy Scimitar Squad to Karkarus for *Operation Deadshot*. They ought to be finished with the ork incursion on Ixio by then.’

‘Let us hope Talon returns to full strength soon. There can be no rest for us, despite this success. There will be many dead-ends before our long journey is over. Keep searching. Keep exceeding my expectations.’

‘And Chiaro?’

‘I will authorise the usual action myself later today. The Watch Council at Talasa Prime will back it. The Naval defence monitors will remain to enforce quarantine for now, but a kill-ship will arrive within the week. Nothing will remain.’

‘Then, with your permission, I will take my leave. Only, before I go... My sister...’

‘She sleeps, my friend, as always. No change. Perhaps the results of *Blackseed* can be turned to her recovery in time. Or perhaps her cure will come via another route entirely. That is why I need you out there, continuing to do what you do best. I can trust no other to the same degree.’

‘You have my oath. I will do all that needs doing.’

‘I know you will. And together, we will cure her one day. Have faith.’

‘Vigilance. And may the Emperor watch over you.’

‘Vigilance, old friend. *In nomine Imperator*. We shall speak again soon.’

## TALON SQUAD

Lyandro Karras, First Codicier of the Death Spectres, aka Talon Alpha, aka *Scholar*

Darrion Rauth, Battle-brother of the Exorcists (First Company), aka Talon Two, aka *Watcher*

Ignacio Solarion, Battle-brother of the Ultramarines (Fourth Company), aka Talon Three, aka *Prophet*

Maximmion Voss, Brother-sergeant of the Imperial Fists (Second Company), aka Talon Four, aka *Omni*

Siefer Zeed. Battle-brother of the Raven Guard (Third Company), aka Talon Five, aka *Ghost*

Chyron Amadeus, Dreadnought of the Lamenters Chyropheles (Second Company), aka Talon Six

## THE INQUISITION

Sigma, Inquisitor lord, Ordo Xenos (real name unknown)

Shianna Varlan, Interrogator class 3, Ordo Xenos, aka Lady Fara Devanon

Ordimas Arujo, Intelligence agent, Ordo Xenos, aka Asset 16, aka the Puppeteer

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Edinburgh, Scotland, STEVE PARKER currently lives and works in Tokyo, Japan. In 2005, his short fiction started appearing in American SF/fantasy/horror magazines. In 2006, his story ‘The Falls of Marakross’ was published in the Black Library’s *Tales from the Dark Millennium* anthology. His first Warhammer 40,000 novel, *Rebel Winter*, was published in 2007, followed by the novels *Gunheads* and *Rynn’s World*, first of the Space Marine Battles series. He introduced readers to the Deathwatch kill-team known as Talon Squad in the short stories *Headhunted* and *Exhumed*, both available as eBooks. When he’s not writing or destroying himself in the gym, he enjoys martial arts, heavy metal music, military documentaries, supporting wildlife conservation and eating good vegetarian food. One day, he would like to earn the Crux Terminatus..



By the blessing of the Omnissiah was the *Mars Triumphant* born – from the forges of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the mighty Baneblade super-heavy battle tank comes to bring death and destruction to the foes of the Imperium.

Download now from [blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)



**READ IT FIRST**

EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS | EARLY RELEASES | FREE DELIVERY

[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)

*To a very special bird for all her strength and courage in the face of a most murderous and deceitful foe.*

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

**Published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

**© Games Workshop Limited 2013. All rights reserved.**

**Black Library, the Black Library logo, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy logo, The Horus Heresy eye device, Space Marine Battles, the Space Marine Battles logo, Warhammer 40,000, the Warhammer 40,000 logo, Games Workshop, the Games Workshop logo and all associated brands, names, characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer 40,000 universe are either ®, ™ and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2013, variably registered in the UK and other countries around the world.**

**All rights reserved.**

**A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.**

**ISBN 978-0-85787-812-0**

**No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise except as expressly permitted under license from the publisher.**

**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 the Black Library on the internet at**

**[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)**

**Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer  
and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at**

**[www.games-workshop.com](http://www.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.

## FOOTNOTES

1. . RP – Rendezvous Point.
2. . GDC – Ground Defence Command.
3. . S.I. – Standard Imperial: a single year of one thousand days in the official Imperial calendar
4. . khadit – literally ‘giver of knowledge’; shares a root with ditah, meaning ‘father’ in Occludian Low Gothic.
5. . The Occludian day is 27.3 hours.
6. . The Megron – a position roughly equivalent to Master of the Flag in other Space Marine Chapters.
7. . khajar – literally receiver of wisdom; the term by which a khadit addresses his foremost student. The word shares an etymological root with jari, the Occludian Low Gothic for son.
8. . Cadash – translates approximately from Old Occludian as ‘the living chalice’.
9. . Melanchromic organ – the phase 13 implant responsible for cutaneous protection from radiation.
10. . Mucranoid – the phase 16 implant controlling sweat-gland secretions to protect against climatic extremes.
11. . Betcher’s gland – the phase 17 implant allowing internal production of a corrosive toxin projected by spitting.
12. . Cyanomorphide – a ‘nucleocode’ drug also known as Shift which, in combination with ingested samples of genetic material, allows certain mutants to mimic the physical form of others.
13. . ne-sergeants – candidates for advancement to the position of Watch sergeant. By Deathwatch conventions, the prefix ne– denotes a candidate under consideration for further honour.
14. . The Purifier – phase 14 implant known more properly as the oolitic kidney, which purges toxins from a Space Marine’s body.
15. . Progenoids – two extremely important glands – phase 18

implants – that grow inside a living Space Marine; they contain the genetic seeds of all other implant organs and are used to make more Space Marines. There is no other way.

[16.](#) . Darguu – a close-quarters martial discipline emphasising reflexive movement through nerve conditioning.

[17.](#) . HID – Human Interference: Deliberate.

[18.](#) . Psytroprene – a memory-wiping drug often employed by the Inquisition. A 1cc dose wipes approximately forty minutes of memory in average humans. The lost memories can never be recovered, even by psychic means.

[19.](#) . Menrahir – the Chapter council of the Death Spectres; from the word menris, meaning ‘sage’ in Occludian Low Gothic

[20.](#) . LAV – Light Armoured Vehicle.

[21.](#) . HE – high-explosive.