

WARHAMMER
40,000

IRON HANDS

'Action and hardcore military sci-fi
in a dark and brutal universe.'

– *RPG United*

JONATHAN GREEN

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

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

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

OCULARIS TERRIBUS

'All the stars in the sky cannot blot out the hateful glare of the red moon's eye. The birthing place of the Great Enemy pulses with all the malice of a daemon that is dreaming, casting its shadow over all we have ever done and all we ever shall.'

- Eldrad Ulthran, Farseer of Ulthwe craftworld

PROLOGUE

THE ALL-SEEING EYE

INCENSE SMOKE CURLED through the sickly sweet-scented processed air of the reclusium chamber in a fug of sparkling coral mist, rising into the gloom of the chamber's distant, vaulted dome. Hovering candles created bobbing islands of hazy yellow light amidst the pink-tinged fog of the darkened place. It was silent other than for the crackling and popping of the resinous coals in the braziers.

The astropath residing in the centre of the chamber was trance-dreaming.

In the unreality of her dream the universe was a pleasant place to live. In her half-waking reverie she could use her legs. She ran through meadows of verdant flocktail grass under a sky that was crystal blue, studded with puffs of white cumulous cloud, not discoloured by a permanent sickly brown smog, even though the only planet she had ever known was an over-industrialised hive world. She had never even seen a meadow, so the green of the rippling grass and the blue of the sky were too vibrant, too brilliant, overexposed in their intensity.

The flocktails brushed against her smock and her bare legs, as she exhilarated in the feeling of being free of the strategium shell. The air was fragrant with the heady scent of rose-orchid pollen; the sun's rays beat down on the skin of her uncovered arms and shoulders, warming her skin. She had hair in this existence too, luxurious auburn tresses that cascaded like fine-spun silk to the middle of her back. And in this world she was beautiful and young again, as if the decades of imprisonment had never occurred, as if time had wound back to an instant that had never in fact existed.

How was it, she wondered sleepily, that she could dream of things she had never seen or experienced? But of course it was thanks to the same psychic awareness that allowed her to perceive the fluctuating currents of the immaterium, and read the future that was written there for those who had the eyes to see it.

With the hiss of compressed gas, the bulkhead door to the reclusium irised open, rousing the dreamer from her hypnotic reverie. A figure stood-silhouetted in the aperture, tall and robed, surrounded by a nimbus of muted backlight. With a whirring of neck servos the astropath looked up. There was very little of her that had not been augmented or adapted in some way.

The astropath's life-support cradle was suspended from a gargoyle-mouthed buttress that projected out into the centre of the reclusium, wreathed with power cables and feed-pipes. It hung at the centre of a complex pattern inscribed on the Mhorovite onyx floor of the chamber, the detailing of the warding sigils and inscriptions of holy lore picked out in platinum, silver and gold.

Awake, the warp-seer's numerous psycho- and mechanical-induced tics recommenced as well. The elongated fingertips of her hands tapped a rapid staccato rhythm on the polished marble plinth in front of her, her eyes spasmodically glancing at the deck of crystal cards every few seconds.

Between glances, the astropath looked up at her visitor. The man was tall and stick thin. His body was swathed by a heavy cowled robe, like those favoured by many servants of the Emperor, its hem elaborately embroidered with the machine-code catechisms of the Omnissiah's priesthood. She could see little of his face beneath the shadowing hood of the cowl, other than the myopic blinking of a red ocular implant.

The figure strode across the black stone floor of the chamber towards the seer's consultation plinth, a metallic tapping punctuating the sackcloth scrape of his heavy robes dragging across the floor.

The astropath knew why the magos was here: there was only one reason why anyone of his standing ever came to visit her prison. Her gaze lingered for a split second longer on the tarot deck in front of her.

There were no words of greeting exchanged between the two. As far as her visitor was concerned, she was merely a tool to be used for a specific job, no different to a lascutter or hydraulic wrench. There was no need for conversation. That said, when the priest utilised a tool such as electro-forceps he made a supplication to its machine spirit before commencing. She did not even warrant that. She knew her place.

'Begin,' was all the visitor said.

'The cards have been prepared, anointed with oils and thrice-blessed before the image of the Emperor Enthroned,' the seer intoned in the accepted litany of the tarot reading, her voice resonating with the buzzing hiss of an augmetic voice box.

She raised the deck in her adapted hands and deftly shuffled the cards with the speed of an automated credit counter, the beautifully worked, wafer-thin slivers of crystal flying between her articulated digits and arranging themselves into an esoteric order potent with eldritch potentialities and possibilities, known only to capricious whims of fickle fate.

It could take centuries to master the Emperor's tarot, to learn every combination of cards, every subtle nuance of meaning, read every play of warp-light on the psychoplastic-impressed images. Time few practitioners were ever graced with.

One scribe-artist would labour his entire lifetime lovingly hand-crafting a single card. The deck of seventy-eight cards on the plinth in front of the seer was itself worth a planetary governor's ransom.

Laid out in their entirety, the cards formed an allegorical image of the entire Imperium - a realm that spanned a million worlds and untold billions of souls - its heroes and its enemies. In the Emperor's Tarot there were cards representing the champions of the mankind including the noble warrior, who was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in his service of the Imperium, the superhuman Space Marine brother of the mighty Adeptus Astartes; the truth-seeking inquisitor; the rabble-rousing preacher

of the Imperial creed; the shadowy, death-dealing assassin; the inspiring Chaplain of the Astartes Chapters, the unequivocal judge and the warp-seeing astropath, of course.

Conversely, there were also cards bearing terrible, soul-searing images depicting the myriad enemies that threatened the human race. These were the cards of the Arcana Discordia. There was the vile, faithless traitor; the sorcerous alien warlock; the disgusting mutant, and the blasphemous-tongued heretic. There was the hulking tusk-mawed form of the beast ascendant, the leering horror that was the daemon and the notoriously guileful, ambiguous character of the Harlequin - the wild card of the Emperor's tarot.

But of course the most potent card in the tarot was that of the immortal Emperor himself, bound within the ancient, unfathomable technology of the Golden Throne of Terra.

A skilful astropath could discern the shape of things to come from a reading of the tarot. The many paths that fate might tread in executing its grand designs could be seen in the pattern of the cards since the pictures on their faces were psychically attuned to the constant flux of that otherworldly half-reality that existed beyond the physical universe.

The warp.

The immaterium.

The empyrean.

The ether.

The Sea of Souls.

The Realm of Chaos.

It was man's greatest hope and yet also his gravest peril. Humanity's link to that realm of raw emotion, the spiritual counter-universe, enabled mankind to draw upon the infinite power that lay there waiting to be exploited. And yet his very presence in that place attracted the interest of predators born of mankind's own imperfect psyche.

The seer revealed the top card. Upon it was inscribed a robed acolyte, carrying a hammer and a book. As both the astropath and her visitor watched, the image seemed to flex and ripple until it settled again, only now the image of the supplicant's augmented face appeared on that of the High Priest. This card would act as his talisman signifier; the card representing the one for whom the reading was being made.

'Your signifier,' the seer said, her voice scarcely more than a croak.

'Continue,' was all her supplicant said.

The astropath took up the rest of the deck again and proceeded to carefully lay out seven cards face down on the plinth in front of her, two inside a circle of five; the classic basic reading pattern.

The seer inhaled deeply, breathing in the heady perfume of the incense, feeling it free her mind of the restrictions of the physical failings of her body. Her breathing became slow and regular as she freed her spirit to commune with the warp.

Psykers - the name commonly given to those with psychic talents - had appeared in the human race long before the founding of the Imperium. Psychic ability was the human race's curse as much as its gift. Without this mutation the Imperium could not survive. Without psykers, messages could not be sent tens of thousands of light years to all corners of the Emperor's galaxy-spanning realm. Ships could not traverse the empyrean and make journeys between worlds that would otherwise take a thousand lifetimes. The servants of the sinister Officio Inquisitorum could not defend the Imperium's loyal servants from those who would pervert the Emperor's Will, and see His works undone and all creation overturned. And the Navigator Houses of the Navis Nobilite would not have their position of privilege brought them via their stranglehold of power on the Administratum of Terra.

And yet the great majority of psykers were reviled, shunned by all right-thinking people. For it was through the psyker that the Fell Powers could work their corruption in the physical universe. Thanks to the psyker, daemonic creatures, born of base unchecked human emotions, could break through into the material realm. It was they who could bring the Imperium to the very edge of destruction and then take it over into the abyss.

The astropath looked down at the cards with her astral vision. Even the intricate illuminations decorating the backs of the crystal slivers appeared more vibrant and alive with a spectrum of colours that could only exist within the warp, lit by the eerie light of non-existent stars.

Through her psychic sight she could see other darting images superimposed on the mundane world that existed within the reclusium. Creatures that looked like disc-shaped sharks swam through the ether, circling her visitor, who was totally unaware of their presence.

In contrast to the uselessness of her crippled body, the warp-seer's soul-fire burned so brightly that it would normally obliterate the faint flickers

of those nearby. But the cloaked figure's aura shone brightly too. Fate obviously had a purpose in mind for him as well.

The warp predators circled both her and the magos, drawn to the lustrous brilliance of their souls, frondlike feelers waving in the unknowable currents of the immaterium, snapping at their glowing outlines with horribly fanged jaws.

The astropath returned her attention to the cards placed with machine precision on the marble plinth top in front of her.

'We stand alone facing the universe and seek the path of wisdom,' she said, using the accepted form of the Prayer of Enlightened Insight. 'Each card has its cosmic meaning - for humanity, for this world and for those present here. I invoke thee, beloved Emperor. Infuse these cards that I might attain true insight of things hidden, to thy greater glory and the salvation of humanity.'

She turned over the first card.

The snarling face of a fire and brimstone preaching missionary looked back at her from the card, but the image was upside down. As the astropath focused on the tarot card the picture on its liquid crystal surface swam but seemed unable to fix itself in one form. The Preacher's face continued to change from one arrangement of features to another in an unending cycle.

'The Preacher inverted. A blasphemer who preaches a message of death and destruction, a creed contrary to the will of the Emperor.'

In the back of her mind a shape began to coalesce in the darkness of her subconscious.

The warp-seer turned over the second card. The double-headed turncoat Traitor. She gasped involuntarily, the fan-pump that fed her lungs whining at double speed to compensate.

'Adjacent to the Preacher the Traitor is someone other than the blasphemer, but one who would aid the malignant agitator's cause, knowingly or otherwise.'

Emerging from her subconscious, like a leviathan monster rising from the depths of a black ocean to the sunlit surface, the image became clearer.

The supplicant watched in silence. The third card was turned.

'The Ship.' - an explorator vessel plying the channels between the stars - 'meaning the wandering traveller or the journey not yet taken. In the quadrant tertius, a quest into the unknown.'

Still the figure said nothing.

'The Space Marine,' the astropath said, relief evident in her voice, as she revealed the fourth card. 'The Adeptus Astartes. The sons of the primarchs. The champions of Him on Earth. Opposite the blasphemer in the circle. There is still hope for mankind.'

There was blood red armour now, inscribed with the perverted litanies of the inviolable Imperial creed.

The seer turned her attention to the pair of cards lying at the centre of the circle.

'The Daemon Ascendant and the Titan inverted. A card of the Discordia and a card of the Arcana Adeptio together?' she said darkly, her brows knotting. The meaning was unclear to her. The Daemon, representative of the Great Enemy itself, order overturned, bloodshed and slaughter, combined with the god-engine, the card of might and unconquerable power, but turned on its head. It could mean the walls of the Imperium beaten down or indomitable strength in the hands of Chaos.

Unnerved the seer continued.

The only card remaining was the one at the apex of the star of five surrounding the Daemon and the Titan. She lifted the card from the plinth and placed it down on the cold marble again, face up.

A glowering eye, set amidst spiralling crimson-purple clouds, stared back with its baleful, fiery gaze.

The astropath swallowed hard, feeling her gorge rise. Fires, like the fires of a maelstrom that would devour a whole world, blazed within the eye, its malignant gaze boring into her.

'The All-Seeing Eye,' she gasped and closed her eyes against its malevolent stare.

But the image still swelled before her, until it was all she could see. She was like a tiny drifting speck of dust within a hurricane before the burning stare of the galaxy-sized eye, its surface burning like a sun, the swirling nebulae, the birthplace of dark stars, spinning within the vortex of the Sea of Souls. The howling of an eldritch wind blew right through her, threatening to extinguish the brilliant flame of her soul's fire; it was the only sound she could hear. The only sensation she experienced was the stomach-knotting nausea of abject fear.

Trapped within the transfixing stare of the warp, her mind opened to all the horrors the future held, like a blossoming rose-orchid...

...AS SOMETHING MONSTROUS fractured reality. In a blaze of sickly light the ruddy-bronze hull of a baroque leviathan re-entered the physical universe. After the hull came kilometre after kilometre of gargoyle-encrusted weapon decks, strike craft launch bays, baroquely ornamented weapon ports as the ancient battleship slipped smoothly from the warp. Finally, the con tower of the capital vessel broke through from the realm of daemons along with the ancient, power plant-sized engines, the method of their construction and even the science-mysticism behind their operation now lost across oceans of time.

For the first time in three millennia, the ship that had once proudly born the name *Vox Veritas*, was free to continue its missionary cause, in the name of the Fell Powers, and wreak its destruction, having been lost on the capricious tides of warp space for over three thousand years.

The ancient vessel hung in the void of space, at the edge of the remote white dwarf system, its ruddy shadow blocking out the starfield beyond, just as the corrupting darkness of Chaos oozing from the warp-realspace overlap of the Ocularis Terribus would blot out the Emperor's light across the Imperium of Mankind.

Then the leviathan engines fired again and the *Corrupter of Colchis*, as the ship was now known, angled its prow in-system and set a course for the seventh planet orbiting the distant dying star...

...THE HATCH DROPPED down with a clang and with clanking, crab-like steps the daemon-engine emerged from the bowels of the blasphemous landing craft. Six massive steel claws, each weighing-over a tonne, came to rest on the fractured mound of the spoil heap. From the oil- and slime-dripping thorax the savage machine rose to a height of twenty metres above the crater-scarred earth. The rusted outer metal skin of the baroque monstrosity bubbled with rust and suppurating ulcers oozed stinking, yellow, infected pus.

The idolatrous constaint was surmounted by a visor-eyed horned helm. Balefires burned behind the eye-slits. The turret body of the monstrosity swivelled on its waist, its possessing daemon-spirit surveying its surroundings: the jagged horizon of cooling towers and manufactory spires. The ragged standard fixed to the machine's rusted banner pole bore a blasphemous sigil formed from three mildewed circles of rot.

Drifts of ash grey smoke rolled across the battlefield before the monster engine, the ruptured hulls of derelict tanks, abandoned gun emplacements and the bolter-devastated bodies of the dead appearing in the spaces between the cloudbanks.

The unholy creation became aware of tiny creatures scurrying around its feet. Daemonic senses detected impacts against its rusting iron hide, like the hot stings of giant mosquitoes. The loyal Imperialist dogs fell back from the monstrous machine as their attacks had little effect on the corrupted hulk. The searing whine and spang of las-bolts was accompanied by the cacophony of the soldiers' screams.

The dark soul of the plague-bearing engine chuckled cruelly, an abrasive laugh barking from the vox-grille of its helm, provoking further despairing cries from the fleeing Imperialist scum. Slime-encrusted mechadendrite tentacles reached for the men. Its rattling autocannon roared into life and its belly-cannon gave a throbbing *boom* as it fired into the pack of panicking soldiers, turning an entire squad into a spray of bloody mist and powdered bone.

Belching foul-smelling, toxic smoke from its corroded exhaust stacks the daemon-engine advanced across the battlefield with ratchetting strides, crushing unfortunate soldiers beneath its claw-toed feet, ready to reap souls for Nurgle in the name of the Warmaster...

...THE GROUND SHOOK as they marched at a slow dirge-pace across the scarred surface of devastated Japheth. The dread warriors of the Tyrant of Sycorax kept rank as they marched, upright and proud, upholders of a noble martial tradition, conquerors of this world and the soul-sworn enemies of the false carrion lord of the Imperium of Man. The world of Japheth had trembled at their arrival, been rocked by their warmongering, and would quake at their passing.

They were a terrifying, awesome sight to behold, proud and darkly noble, yet with a savage, feral quality. They looked resplendent in armour, rust-brown blood stains attesting to the number of their enemy they had slain in battle, ancient favoured wargear clashing against the breastplates of their armour in a clatter of crashing metal, like the clamour of battle itself.

Behind the Traitor Marines came the cultist worshippers of the Fell Powers, homicidal maniacs who would rather live the existence of the

insane than die in the service of the God-Emperor of Mankind. They came half-naked, some wearing the ritual robes of their perverted faith while others still wore the uniform of the regiments they had originally belonged to, only now the noble insignia of the Imperium were defaced and replaced with blasphemous symbols of the outer darkness. They came in their hundreds, swelling the ranks of the Chaos host.

Behind those traitor Guardsmen and the insane congregations of the Chaos cults came the mutants, creatures not quite human but neither entirely animal in form, yet greater than both. And they came in their thousands. Tentacle-limbed things, hulking beasts, bellowing multi-armed monstrosities, mewling savage-clawed, insect-headed perversions of nature, scaled brutes, the warped foot soldiers of the Ruinous Powers.

No matter how grotesque these warped warriors might appear, following in their wake were indescribable writhing, slithering, constantly metamorphosing horrors. If they had once been men, then the revulsion and sheer terror they instilled in any who looked upon them was only heightened. These horrors were spine-bristling, fanged and mutated proof that Chaos was a fickle master whose gifts, as well as potentially leading to power and riches beyond measure, might also reduce a damned soul to something far less than human under its corrupting caress. For these were the true, terrifying spawn of Chaos.

And behind all this host of the lost and the damned the horizon burned, the light of the raging hive-fires of conquered Japheth eclipsing the bitter light of the sun...

...THE ARID PLAIN burned under the planet's twin suns, sizzling beneath every crunching footstep of the Apostle's gore-stained ceramite boots.

Ancient power armour the colour of dried blood glinted in the harsh, glaring suns-light. Edging trim that looked like riveted, sculpted bone shone like bleached skulls. The ceramite-armoured giant advanced across the parched earth, his titanic shadow reaching out across the arid wilderness ahead of him.

The dazzling light of the burning sky reflected from the glassy surface of the plain, blurring the definition between heaven and earth. And on the distant horizon the crumbling sandstone walls of an ancient city rose out of the desert plain, a fortified citadel surmounting the jagged outcrop of a desert plateau.

This was the next stop on his centuries-long pilgrimage that would ultimately bring him to the time revealed to him by the secret messengers of the warp so many eons ago.

Incongruous in the torturous desert heat, draped across the giant's shoulders was the white and black-striped pelt. Clanking chains swung from his waist. Scraps of parchment whipped the air in the hot desert wind, bearing verses and catechisms written in a faded ink scrawl. Other zealous proclamations were inscribed upon gauntlets, armoured greaves and every other ceramite plate. The crackle of flames accompanied the sounds of the desert. Fires burned in the brazier exhausts of the armoured suit's reactor; burning like the unholy zeal blazing inside his dark, corrupted heart.

The Apostle strode across the desert plain, alone, catechisms of faith hot on his tongue, and smiled with the insane smile of the zealot. The time of ascension was fast approaching. And he had waited an age, longer than it had taken for the tectonic plates to shape the planet upon which he now walked. Now that the time of waiting was almost over, he had to ensure that all was ready.

The Apostle looked once more towards the distant desert city, shimmering in the scorching heat haze, his enhanced eyesight and the systems inside his armoured helm magnifying the vista so that he could see more clearly the black shapes lining the road approaching the walled citadel.

The King's Highway leading to the crumbling city walls was lined with hundreds of crucifixions...

...THE WIND MOANED like a wailing widow through the labyrinthine tunnels of the ice caves. Fleeting images seemed to move within the fractured blue of the frozen walls, and behind them there was a barely visible crystalline glow.

The ice tunnels wound on and down, down into the ancient heart of the glacier, down into the splintered bedrock of the planet. And there, in a vault of ice, glowing with a dull cold blue radiance stood the black stone. It protruded through the drifted snow and fallen icy stalactites, a perfectly carved octahedral pyramid. Something about it suggested that there was much more of the ancient artefact buried beneath.

The gale-force winds scouring the frozen surface of the world above found their way deeper into the ice caves and were channelled into the freezing cold cavern. As if in response, the ice and stone began to vibrate, setting up their own resonances in discordant juxtaposition to the howling of the ice-winds.

The sound of the ice choir and the singing stone were unsettling, redolent with the feral voices of another time, another existence. The throbbing resonances would have felt uncomfortable, exerting unnatural pressures on the human ear, had there been anybody there to hear them...

...THINGS SEEN AND yet unseen. The whispers of the warp. The lies and half-lies of gods and daemons. All things that had already happened, that were happening even now, or that would come to pass when the fates proscribed.

Something moved towards her through the shifting currents of the Sea of Souls. Something black and pitiless.

The entity was as different to the soul-sharks as they were to her. The devilish creature clawed its way towards her through the ether, anglerfish jaws opening wide, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She was utterly defenceless against it.

Potentialities and possibilities continued to twist and writhe within the warp in their slithering dance of eons...

* * *

'YOUR PATHETIC IMPERIUM is doomed!' the astropath spat, the words uttered in a voice altered by the malevolence that spoke through her. 'The time of the false emperor is at an end. All will perish in a firestorm that will sweep through the galaxy of man when the Eye opens again! Unnumbered daemons will feast on a billion billion souls until the end of all things.'

Her eyes rolled in the dark wells of their sockets. Tears of blood dripped down her face. She was raving now, her mind broken, her soul condemned for all eternity.

The magos observed the warp-seer with the same unflinching gaze that he had worn ever since he had set foot inside the prison of her reclusium chamber. Flecks of spittle flew from the woman's lips. Her gums bled.

The organic part of the tech-priest's nose twitched. The acrid foundry smell of hot metal assailed his nostrils and implanted artificial olfactory sensors. He glanced away from the crippled psyker to see that the platinum, gold and silver that picked out the warding patterns set into the marble floor had liquefied, smoky vapour welling up from the molten metal.

'The Arch-Fiend comes! Terror shall rain upon the border worlds. Drach'nyen thirsts and shall never be sated until it gorges itself upon the husk that lies bound to the Golden Throne. The stars shall be stained red with blood. All shall be darkness!'

The voice was not hers; she was possessed, he knew. Her reading of the tarot had opened the way for other things to cross over from the immaterium. She had seen things that no mortal being should ever have to see. And now she had paid the ultimate price, the one that every astropath risked every time they tried to read the shifting tides of the warp, despite all the warding precautions.

He realised that the astropath was lost but he was not done with her yet. She had become a conduit for entities that had no place in the temporal universe, and would have to be destroyed, but there was still much that could be learnt from such creatures. Knowledge was life, after all. In their desperation to be unleashed upon the physical world of the senses, the things manifested from man's most primal emotions would readily reveal the secrets of the future to those who knew how to listen.

Calmly, the tech-priest withdrew an exotic-looking firearm from within the folds of his robes.

The ranting continued but the magos remained impassive. He checked the load of his pistol. He raised the gun. Then the warp-seer uttered one word that stayed his hand.

'Araken will awaken! But the key to the prize that lies within the crucible of war shall be found upon the remaining guardian worlds. The keepers of the faith shall open the way to enlightenment, the way to the immortality of death. All shall bow before the lost gods, believer and unbeliever alike.'

The life-support cradle rattled and shook as the astropath's body thrashed within it. Then her voice became a gargling wail as epileptic seizures gripped her.

The magos levelled his pistol again. There was nothing more that the warp-seer could offer him and so he would put an end to the possession, and her suffering.

The weapon fired with a discharge of matter-rending emerald energy and summary execution was carried out.

SHE WAS RUNNING through the grass meadows again, only now the sky was haemorrhaging all-consuming darkness like an open wound spouting blood. And she was running for her life, for her very soul. The fabric of her dream-world was rapidly being consumed by the spreading infection of Chaos. The flocktail grass withered and died.

Then, with an unholy roar like the screams of a daemon choir, fire burst across the heavens and the sky began to burn. The meadows were gone and all around her were endless plains, drenched in blood and sown with the skulls of countless millions.

The last thing the seer saw - the image filling the fiery sky beyond the horizon - was that of the daemon-lord, the Warmaster of Chaos, blasphemy personified. A cloud-washed blue-green world was held in his crushing claw, the very crust of the planet fracturing in his grasp, boiling magma - its life blood - leaking from the broken sphere.

Thunder rumbled across the burning sky above her.

No, not thunder. Laughter.

The hellish noise echoed inside her skull; it was the last sound she heard.

A spear of white heat sliced through her brain and her world exploded into oblivion.

MEDUSA

'And lo, despair was compounded, for Mankind had lost not only He Who Broke the Darkness, Ferrus Manus, the Shining Light of Medusa, cut down by Foul Corruption and Betrayal: for worse was to come, and there was much anguish and horror, for the Most Holy God-Emperor was, alas, to be lost to the world of Man.'

- Extract from the *Scriptorium of Iron*

ONE

IRON-FATHER

**LAND-BEHEMOTH *WEYLAND* OF THE IRON HANDS'
VURGAAN CLAN COMPANY, THE CHAPTER WORLD OF
MEDUSA**

THE NEAR-QUIET of the apothecarion reverberated softly with the whirring and clicking of the hovering attendant surgical servo-skulls, the careful work of the clan company's chirurgeon-healer and the plainsong chanting of the distant Iron Choirs, as they called on His Divine Majesty's protection for the Iron-Father and the Omnissiah's blessing on the bionic replacement that was to be grafted to his body. The Iron-Father was coming one step closer to eradicating all weakness from his physical form.

Strong in mind, strong in body: that was the way of the sons of Ferrus Manus.

Two Space Marines of the Iron Hands' Chapter stood silently in the darkness of the chirurgia-annexe, while the Iron-Father's servitor

bodyguard stood motionless as statues at the entrance to the apothecarion, their pallid flesh a deathly grey in the low light of the operating theatre. The chamber was lit only by the soft torchlight from the walls, the focused beams of the flitting servo-skulls and the Apothecary's operating spotlight.

Brother-Apothecary Caduceus's gleaming white armour picked up every speck of light and reflected it back into the chamber. Its brightness was a stark contrast to the black and grey armoured suit worn by Iron-Father Gdolkin, lying on the operating slab. The one way in which it did resemble Gdolkin's was in the clan marking borne on its left shoulder plate. The symbol of a polished taloned gauntlet, on black, stood out like silver in a seam of carbon, whilst on the right shoulder plate there was etched the winged prime helix that was the emblem of the Apothecaries. The bright blood-red design represented not only the sacred gene-seed of the Chapter, the protection and perpetuation of which was the Apothecary's prime duty, but also the sacrifice that every Marine was prepared to suffer to ensure the Chapter's future survival.

Around and above them, carved into the stone cornicing or cast into the adamantium walls, were the cog-toothed, lightning strike, winged helix and claw-handed symbols of the Cult Mechanicus, Vurgaan clan, Apothecarion and Iron Hands' Chapter respectively. There were also the memento mori skulls and eagle-winged insignia of the Imperium of Mankind, ever-present in the architecture and ornamentation of that ancient galaxy-spanning realm, adorning every surface, every jutting buttress and bulkhead door, practically every rivet of the chamber.

The damage the Iron-Father had suffered whilst cleansing the Chaos-infected derelict space ship could be clearly seen now that the mangled wreck of his gauntlet had been removed.

That his flesh had failed him angered Gdolkin. It reminded him of his own humanity. He was still mortal after all, and that angered him also. Oh for the holy perfection of the dreadnought, to live like the Emperor upon his Golden Throne, enshrined within an immortal body of adamantium and ceramite. That was the dream of any Space Marine, to continue the fight for the Imperium even after his death. And it was even truer of the techno-venerating Iron Hands' Chapter, and amongst them this attitude was epitomised in Iron-Father Gdolkin. It was his one desire, after that of serving his Emperor and laying waste to the enemies of humanity, to

become a leviathan of legend, a dreadnought war machine in the eternal service of his Chapter, his primarch and his Emperor.

The Iron-Father's right hand was a mangled pulp. The fingers were gone and only the thumb remained, half hanging off, now that it did not have the support of the metal sheathing glove to hold it together. Bone gleamed in the cold halogen light. There was little bleeding, however, since the Larraman cells that had been released into his bloodstream when he was injured had formed a skin-like layer of scar tissue over the injury.

His right hand had lasted two hundred years longer than his left. Space Marines of the Iron Hands' Chapter had their left hands removed on joining the brotherhood and replaced with an entirely augmetic replica, in honoured memory of their primarch, Ferrus Manus.

But Iron-Father Gdolkon was different. He had lost his left hand before he had ever been chosen as an aspirant by the Iron Hands of Medusa.

Although flesh might at times prove weak there were still organic parts of the Iron-Father's bio-engineered body that he would find hard to do without. The adapted part of his brain that was the sus-an membrane was such a one. The genetically manipulated augmentation would allow him to dislocate his mind, reliving past experiences in another zone of consciousness, so as to leave behind the pain his body would be subjected to as the surgical procedure was undertaken.

Already slowing his breathing to help him enter the trance-like state he would enjoy whilst the surgery was being performed, Gdolkon took the laurel-leaved talisman of his Mechanicus Protectiva in his bionic left hand. The tiny internal pistons and tension cables of the fingers operated so smoothly that Gdolkon could almost forget that they were not of flesh and blood, were it not for the fact that the replacement of body parts with augmetics was core to the Iron Hands' belief system, and ultimately a result of their genetic predisposition.

The Mechanicus Protectiva was the sacred badge of office of an Iron Hands' Iron-Father and a potent device in its own right. The rank of Iron-Father combined that of both Chaplain and Techmarine amongst the Sons of Ferrus Manus. In the same way, the Mechanicus Protectiva combined the rosarius worn by the Chaplains of other Chapters with the force-field technology granted to those Marines who studied under the Priesthood of Mars - red planet of the Machine God and the resting place of the

Omnissiah itself - as part of their induction into that branch of the Adeptus Astartes.

This all served to make the Mechanicus Protectiva a powerful arcane piece of equipment. The blessings of the Emperor and the Omnissiah were channelled through the amulet to protect the Iron-Father from the assaults of the Emperor's enemies in battle. Gdolkin's Mechanicus Protectiva hung from the breastplate of his armour on a strong iron chain, the red gem set at its centre glowing with an unearthly light as he made his prayer, and the air around it crackled with mystic energies.

'Imperator et Omnissiah.' Gdolkin intoned the sacred words, his voice slurred like that of a man on the verge of waking or sleeping. 'Transunt Mechanica Purgatus.'

A scalpel-wielding servo-skull buzzed into position over the Space Marine's ruined hand and wrist. Blades flashed in the beam of Caduceus's suit light and a saw-toothed disc began to spin up to speed.

Gdolkin triggered the sus-an membrane, entering a self-induced trance-like state.

The wet, slicing of the blades and the high-pitched whine of the saw faded away, and the hot stink of cauterised flesh and burnt bone left him as well, and his mind slipped away to another place, another time.

Another life...

* * *

IT FELT LIKE he had been walking for days. But how many days? It might even have been weeks; he found it hard to keep track of time. The youth looked up at the threatening, ever-overcast canvas of the smoggy heavens and for the umpteenth time wondered if he would ever complete the challenge he had undertaken.

Medusa was a cruel parent. The planet took an exacting toll on all its children and was even tougher on the young men who strove to become initiated as sons of the primarch, to be born again as the elite warriors of the Eternal Emperor.

Anatolus Gdolkin, a youth still, barely turned sixteen standard years, adjusted the pack on his back and trudged onwards towards the jagged silhouette of the horizon. His body, his mind, his very soul, ached with

tiredness, despite the fact that his upbringing on this harsh world meant that he was already strongly built, his frame tall and muscular.

He had slept when he could or when the tempestuous climate demanded he rest, sheltering in rocky overhangs, pulling his tarp-cloak tight around him over his head. But sleep did not come easily on the cold, hard rock, the numbing chill leeching the heat and strength from his tired body, and with the dust storms howling and gritty mica particles skittering across the exposed frozen granite. The wind worried at the oilskin he wrapped about him and fitful moans had him imagining all sorts of horrors riding the wild currents of the blustery sky. Every clan-child learnt at their parent's knee that the ghost-spirits of their people roamed these uninhabited ranges, and the dead did not rest easy.

The crawler-trains never came this far north into the mountains, the terrain was simply too treacherous. The landscape was one of glacier-carved valleys, rent asunder by unimaginably terrible tectonic forces working away beneath the surface of the planet, huge boulders littering the scarred, grey wastes.

In truth, Anatolus only really slept when exhaustion finally took him or when he had managed a kill and his belly was full with yoryx meat. The flesh of the hardy little herbivore, which gnawed the lichen from the rocks of these mountain places with its evergrowing chisel incisors, matched the temperament of these creatures: it was tough and bitter. But at least it was meat.

So Anatolus slept whenever his body demanded it. Up in these windswept icy highlands the days were as cold as the nights so it made little difference what time of day he travelled. He had been alone now for... How long was it? Time had become fractured for him by this inhospitable place, just like the icy mountain summits and earthquake-fissured, sheer-sided valleys, and it no longer had any meaning for him.

Thunder rumbled across the mountain peaks. The storm giants were angry, Anatolus thought, casting anxious glances at the ragged snow-dusted crags around him. His epic journey had taken him from the temporary, tented barter town, where his family's crawler had stopped to refuel and trade ore, further than he, or anyone else in his clan, had ever been before.

There had been another mining-clan caravan hauled up at the edge of the town too, belonging to the Granislatt clan. And there were others

preparing for the testing. Half a dozen boys on the cusp of manhood from among the Granislatt were readying packs and weapons to make the journey into the wilderness. They too were seeking to prove themselves to the ever vigilant eyes of the Iron Hands that they were worthy to join them aboard their mighty fortress-monastery' leviathans. Talk of good omens and the favour of Medusa looking down upon them inspired youths of the Scarrabrae to take up arms and prove themselves able of passing the test too. And at their fore was the determined Anatolus.

He could remember the beginning of his journey more clearly than what had occurred since. But now Anatolus was more interested in how would it end. Would it have the conclusion he desired? He no longer felt so certain that it would. Did he even really care any more? He just kept going for there was nothing else now. That was his world, his life, his one purpose. He would keep walking until matriarchal Medusa decided how his journey would end, one way or another.

As he had left the barter town, his father's bolt pistol heavy in its holster at his side, amidst the scurrafur hides, he looked back on his clan's caterpillar crawler. The *Aes Metallum* was practically a mobile town, manufactorum, mining operation and processing plant in itself, and easily large enough to carry the whole family. The *Aes* and the crawler of the Granislatt clan, squatting next to the tented haggie-town, looking like two suckling hogs, disgorged smoky exhaust fumes into the already darkly polluted atmosphere. It was at that moment that he knew that whatever else happened he would never see his family again. Either Medusa would claim him, his carcass scoured clean by the dust winds and acid atmosphere, or he would achieve his goal and the Sons of Ferrus Manus would take him to be counted among their number.

Thirteen had set out that day from the tent-town, saying goodbye to their families forever. At first the two parties of youths, those of the Scarrabrae and the Granislatt clans had kept their distance. On only the second day the two rival gangs of aspirants came to blows and two young men died. By the fifth day - the memories came more clearly now - the Granislatts and the Scarrabraes shared a bond closer than friendship, closer even than kith and kin.

Then there had come the deaths from exposure, the fatal falls negotiating the icy cliffs, the catastrophic rockfall.

And now only he remained to complete the task, against all odds. At least he still had his bolter and four full clips of ammunition.

There had been no tears as Anatolus's father gifted him with his own precious bolter, for that was not the way of the people of Medusa, only pride. There was no room for sentimentality in a world where daily survival against the elements was a constant battle. The gun felt heavy with age in Anatolus's hand.

The bolter had been handed down throughout the generations, father to son and heir, throughout each generation, just like the name Anatolus. It had been given to his father when Anatolus's grandfather had set out on his last journey into the absolving elements, the sulphur-rot having taken hold deep in his lungs: better to die while some strength was still in him, than to die a feeble weakling, like a mewling babe-in-arms again, coughing and puking on the discharge of his own lungs. Weakness and infirmity could not be tolerated in a society that relied on everyone being able to pull their weight, for the survival of the entire clan. A man who could no longer fulfil his function within the group had no place in it any more.

As Ferrus Manus had taught the people of Medusa, all those thousands upon thousands of years ago, infirmity was a plague that threatened to destroy mankind. In the same way that sickly infants were offered to appease the elements and so as not to place an unnecessary encumbrance on the rest of the community, the honourable thing for the infirm to do was to face their death with honour intact.

Although his father had not openly stated it, Anatolus knew that he was proud of him and what he intended to do. It would have made any man proud that his son should wish to undertake the gruelling, near impossible, quest to prove himself worthy to the star warriors, to become one of the chosen of Ferrus Manus and the great Emperor.

THE RECYCLED AIR of the apothecarion felt clean but cold, Brother Caduceus's breath, and that of the sleeping Iron-Father clouding in the air in front of them. The Apothecary watched the servo-skull intently, its silvered insect legs twitching as it deposited the bloody lump of flesh in a gleaming kidney-shaped dish on the brass instrument table next to the operating slab.

The mess of tissue and bone that had once been a part of the Iron-Father looked like a discarded bloody glove, lying in the chrome bowl. The hand

that had failed Gdolkin in battle would not fail him again. Instead, the weak flesh would be replaced by a far superior bionic augment that would forever be a reminder of the battle honour the Iron-Father won fulfilling the edicts of the Scriptorium of Iron and the tenets of the Iron Hands' Chapter.

A moment later a second cyberneticised skull hove out of the gloom of the chamber, the flickering red sensors of its eyes being the first things Caduceus saw, its prehensile servo-spine coiling and uncoiling organically. In its pincer limbs it held a polished ceramite gauntlet, as gleaming and new as the bionic Gdolkin - like all new recruits - had been given on his induction to the machine-venerating Chapter.

The Apothecary's attentions were abruptly drawn back to the trance-bound Iron-Father as the servo-arm projecting from the top of his armour twitched spasmodically.

But Iron-Father Gdolkin remained unaware, his suspended mind reliving the different experiences of another life, another time.

THE ENTRANCE OF the great chasm yawned before him like the open mouth of a rock serpent, a vast fissure in the rocky skin of Medusa. It cut its way deeply through the barren wilderness for as far as he could see under the perpetual gloom of the pollution-ruined sky. It seemed that it stretched right up to, and possibly even beyond, the jagged teeth of the distant mountain range beyond.

He breathed in deeply, detecting the bitter, oily taste of the unhealthy atmosphere on his tongue, despite the breather-mask covering his nose and mouth. Under the hood of his tarp-cloak, the skin of his face stung in the acid air. It seemed to Anatosus that there were greater levels of pollution in the air of this dead place. The blanket of cloud obscured the sky even more darkly, as if it was in perpetual shadow.

Anatosus had fought his way across the wastes, battling against not only the elements but also the vicious indigenous, and ever-hungry, rock salamanders. Now, having climbed at least a thousand metres, as he travelled ever north - or so his lode compass told him when the unsettled tectonic flux of the planet wasn't sending it haywire - he now found himself descending towards this great chasm, before it rose up sharply again to the ragged folds of the glowering peaks on the serrated horizon.

He had feasted well on the carcass of a salamander that had foolishly thought it could get the better of him. He still had his father's bolter safe at his side although it seemed to weigh more heavily in its holster now. However much he did not want to admit it, the epic journey Anatolus had undertaken was taking its toll on his body. He was weakening and he hated himself and his body for that very reason. Having come so far, he suddenly felt certain that the end of his quest lay at the end of the boulder-strewn path of this darkly shadowed chasm. He had pushed his body to the limits of its endurance. His muscles might ache and his body felt sore to the bone, but it could not fail him now. And the fact that his mind even gave credence to the thought angered him further. If he thought he *could* fail, then he *would* fail. There was no place for such thoughts in one who would aspire to be an Iron Hand, who wished to follow in the footsteps of the warrior-god Ferrus Manus.

Taking a deep breath, he physically tried to shake his tiredness from himself, and took his first faltering steps along the monolith-strewn path into the bottom of the gaping gorge.

THE MEDICAE AUGURS bleeped quietly in the stillness of Brother Caduceus's apothecarion, informing him that his patient was responding well to the surgery as they monitored not only Gdolkin's primary systems but also the nineteen implanted organs that were what made him one of the genetically super-engineered warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. Their number was few but it was they that held the Emperor's enemies at bay.

The last connections were being made now from the nerve-endings in Gdolkin's wrist to the electro-impulse receptors in the technoartisan-crafted hand. The iron gauntlet that would now forever take the place of the hand that the Iron-Father had been born with, more than two centuries ago. It might look brand new, but it had in fact been in the Chapter for over two thousand years since its initial creation by the legendary Mars-trained Iron-Father Menestus, during the days of the Dark Crusade. The hand, which in some texts was referred to as the Gauntlet of Menestus, or the Fist of Iron, had survived the centuries intact. This was the hand that had felled the arch-heretic priest of Statholos. Since the fall of Brother Telamon at the Battle of Occas Hive, the bionic hand, which was still infallible in its operation, had lain in the armoury of fortress-monastery

Weyland, until the day when it had been selected to be bonded to Iron-Father Gdolk.

When the cybernetica droid had completed its work, the surgeon medicae servo-skull would move in again and staple the cauterised flesh of the Iron-Father's lower arm to the gauntlet interface.

For a moment, Brother-Apothecary Caduceus fancied he saw the fingertips of the hand twitch. It must be an automated response to the test electrical impulses being triggered by the servo-skull.

Lost within the dreams of his trance-state, the Iron-Father slept on.

ANATOLUS STOOD, STARING in awe at the wonders before him. He would have gasped if he still had the strength. He had emerged from the ravine into a new and wondrous place. The wind-sculpted skeletons of once towering edifices projected from the ash-dust covering the ground in great drifts as far as the eye could see under the roiling sulphur-streaked cloud, crackling with incandescent lightning bursts. He could see corroded red-iron towers in the shadow of the looming, ice-crowned mountains.

A gust of wind blew a flurry of grey acid snow into Anatolus's cowed face. He blinked away the stinging, caustic flakes.

He did not know for certain where he was or what he was surveying, but he had his suspicions. In all his sixteen years he had never seen anything bigger than a land-train ore-crawler, other than the ageless mountains, but he could tell that these structures were ruins on a vast scale. A hundred land-trains could have got lost within their crumbling avenues and ash-swathed chasms.

What he did know, however, was that he was weary to the core: it was only his relentless stubbornness, refusing to admit that he was spent, that kept him on his feet.

Could it really be? Had he really reached his long sought after goal? Was this the place spoken of in the legends of his people, in the most famous heroic story of He Who Broke the Darkness, the Light-Bringer, Ferrus Manus? Was this really the fabled Land of Shadows?

Whether it was or not, it was a fearful place. The skeletons of the long-dead structures - surely signs that someone, or something, had once dwelt here - filled him with a sense of ominous dread. The chill wind moaned through the wide basin valley, the gaping holes in the stone structures creating resonating, booming harmonics that made Anatolus think of the

wailing of storm giants. The sound of the wind only served to make the place seem even more dead and empty of life than if there had been utter silence.

For a moment he doubted the decision he had taken to make the arduous, mind- and body-testing trek to find the land of the ancients. What could there be for him here other than a slow, lingering death, from exposure or starvation, in the toxic, abrasive cold?

Almost immediately he mentally berated himself for the lapse of his resolve. Such thinking was weakness. He had made it this far. The hard part was behind him. Surely he had proved himself worthy already? He would face whatever awaited him here and see whether he was judged worthy or not by the Sons of Ferrus.

Boldly ready to meet whatever fate would throw his way, Anatolus strode into the dead city.

At first the noise was no more than a slithering susurrations, like a rock-viper gliding over the sand. Then he heard the clicking of claws.

Anatolus went no further, his father's bolt pistol now held firmly in his hand.

A monstrous spectre of gleaming metal bones burst from the drifts in front of him, frozen ash cascading off its parts. The construct rose high above him on a segmented body of silver coils. Its skull-face darted snake-like from side to side between hulking shoulders of adamantium. A distant rumbling lightning burst strobed across the gleaming surface of its body, pock-marked by the degrading march of time. The long-dead clan-chiefs of this place had left their unsleeping servants to protect their decaying realm.

The death's-head grimace fixed Anatolus with a cold, emotionless stare. It was an inhuman thing, a silent killer, its sole purpose at this time, in this place, to take what little of his life remained.

His bolter gripped tight in his hand, Anatolus felt his heart pumping faster and the narcotic kick of adrenaline coursing throughout his body. The metallic guardian would not find his life so easy to take, on that matter he was resolved.

BING... BING... BING.

The chiming of the monitoring logister made the normally calm Apothecary start and the surgical servo-skulls to describe nervous figures

of eight over the operating slab. Caduceus swiftly checked the monitoring medicae-auspex with a trained eye, decades of experience reading the instalments at a glance.

The Iron-Father's hearts-rate had momentarily doubled, his blood pressure rising dramatically with it. The Apothecary's own pulse had quickened fleetingly then as well. He could not lose the Iron-Father now, not during such a routine operation. Gdolkin had served the Chapter for over two hundred years, the two metal studs implanted in the bone of his skull attesting to that fact, recording it for posterity.

What experience was the Iron-Father reliving that could cause provoke such a psychosomatic reaction in a superhuman warrior, a man who had spent the last twenty decades of his life confronting and overcoming some of the most unspeakable horrors - human, alien, and otherwise - that threatened the Imperium across a dozen warzones, in a thousand battles on a hundred worlds?

A moment later the panicked bleeping subsided. Caduceus looked again at the medicae-skulls' work. The chirurgion servitors darted away from the Apothecary as he moved in to assess their work. The procedure was complete.

Caduceus would allow his patient some hours' rest and then a stimulant adrenal-shot would need to be administered. But for now Iron-Father Gdolkin could rest.

HE WAS STILL breathing and he hurt all over in ways he had never thought possible, so he was alive at least.

But for the time being he did not need to open his eyes, not just yet.

Anatolus tried to remember what had happened, how he had managed to stop the death's-head daemon droid. Recollection seeped back into his mind, vague and unclear, memories the consistency of half-remembered dreams on the moment of waking.

He remembered the confrontation in flashes, as though he were reliving the battle once again. He remembered the lightning-fast reflexes of the serpentine guardian, the arching body twisting and turning, flashes of striking silver. He remembered the glass-sharp blades closing around his left wrist, scissoring through flesh and bone and gristle, the hot-cold feeling of the blood spurting from the surgically precise amputation. He remembered numb shock seizing his exhausted body, the anger flaring

through the pain, the kick of his father's gun in his other hand, the bolter shell exploding in the creature's neck, the electronic screaming of the construct, the violent epileptic spasming, blue-white electricity arcing between its overloaded systems, and the lashing of its long segmented tail.

The odds had been overwhelming that he, a mere boy, could defeat one of the guardians of the Ancients, a soulless creature created by long-dead masters of technomancy, but then the odds of him ever getting so far had been overwhelming to begin with. So in its own illogically logical way, it seemed to make sense that he should have succeeded. Ferrus Manus had been looking down on him that day indeed. If it was his fate to die here and now, at least he had proved himself a man, a true child of Medusa.

But now he just wanted to sleep.

His heart beat loudly inside his head, a repetitive thud, like marching feet. The marching sound grew louder, became more distinct. He heard voices.

Anatolus struggled to open puffy, swollen eyes. Darkness pulled back and the roiling billows of smoggy cloud, under-lit by dazzling lightning bursts, lay above him, like a shroud covering this dead land. A face loomed over his, a horrific mess of twisted flesh fused with half a gleaming metal skull, so like the guardian he thought he had destroyed.

His heart rate quickened again.

'By Ferrus, he is still alive.' Anatolus heard a grating, metallic voice say.

Then pain was all he knew and oblivion rushed in on him, a black void swallowing his senses as unconsciousness overcame him.

TWO

JUDGEMENT OF IRON

THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, LAND-BEHEMOTH *WEYLAND*

GDOLKIN'S MIND FELL through the starless void of oblivion.

Silver flashed in the darkness...

Metal ghost faces came at him out of the night...

Pincer claws bit, steel jaws snapped...

The rattle of thunderbolts pierced the darkness...

Skeletal creatures of iron loomed out of the darkness, their voices incomprehensible distorted vox-static. They reached for him with grasping hands, their faces inscrutable metal masks...

Bong... bong... bong...

Anatolus was aware of a distant tolling, like that of a funeral bell.

Bong.

The knelling became louder, more invasive.

Bong.

BONG.

Iron-Father Gdolkín slowly opened his eyes, the recollections of his distant youth fading back into memory.

He looked around him, taking in the apothecarion from Brother Caduceus's operating slab. He was still on Medusa but now he was back inside his clan company's land-behemoth fortress and not in the frozen, necrotic wastelands of the mythical Land of Shadow.

More recent memories resurfaced from the seething depths of his mind, like bubbles rising to the surface of a dark pool, and he looked down at his right hand. The bloody mess of tissue and bone had been replaced by a gleaming metal augmetic.

He tested his new hand, flexing the tension-sprung digits. He rotated his wrist as he did so, taking in the details of the ancient gauntlet's

manufacture: the hammered armour pieces, the embossed Imperial aquila on the back of the hand, the finely-crafted finger joints, every metal knuckle joint worked to resemble a glowering skull.

He recognised the augmetic for the highly revered antique it was and smiled inwardly with satisfaction.

'Is everything to your satisfaction, Iron-Father?' Apothecary Caduceus asked respectfully.

'Oh yes, a great improvement.' Gdolkin said, a grim smile curling the corners of his stern mouth.

If he were honest, Gdolkin was more than satisfied. This replacement would serve him so much better than the flesh and blood original. Even now he felt a momentary stab of anger as he recalled how the frail appendage had failed him. This attitude was a reflection of how he and all Iron Hands' Space Marines ultimately felt about the physical form.

But this hand wouldn't fail him, Caduceus had seen to that. Thanks to the Ommissiah, and the skill of the Machine God's servants, his right hand would never have the chance to let him down again.

Bong.

The ominous tolling of the bell, leaden with solemnity and the weight of ages, came again.

'Iron-Father?'

Gdolkin looked up at the Apothecary's intrusion into his thoughts and followed the glance Caduceus threw towards the chamber's portal. Standing in the doorway was a stooped figure wearing a robe very similar to those worn by the servants of the Machine God, only where the adepts of Mars favoured robes of a deep red hue, the one worn by this man was black, matching the colours of the Iron Hands' Chapter. Also, hanging on a chain about the minion's neck was not the half-skull, half-cyborg symbol of the Opus Machina but the gunmetal grey gauntlet of Ferrus Manus's First Founding Chapter. It had once been a mighty Legion, but ever since the arch-betrayal of the Horus Heresy it had been split into Chapter-strength forces, each no more than a thousand warriors strong. There was the Iron Hands' Chapter itself and its successor Chapters, including the Red Talons and the Brazen Claws, formed when Roboute Guilliman, primarch of the Ultramarines and revered composer of the Codex Astartes, had decreed that so much power could never again rest with one man, and the existing Legions be broken into smaller forces.

The intruder into the peace of the apothecarion was a thrall of the clan, one of those young men who, in ages past, had been forwarded for selection by the scouts of the Sons of Ferrus but who had failed at some level of the induction programme. Whether it was that their bodies had not been able to cope with the bio-genesis of zygote implantation or that their minds could not adapt to the psycho-conditioning that went with it, they had not proved strong enough to be counted among the Iron Hands of the Emperor's elite. And yet, even though the Iron Hands hated weakness in all its forms, their non-brethren still had a role to play within the Chapter, tending to the needs of the noble battle-brothers and maintaining the fabric of the fortress-monasteries, as thralls.

There was no life for the thralls now outside of the clan; the shame of failure prevented them from returning to their tribes, where they would be treated as outcasts. All that was left for them was to serve those whose ranks they had once aspired to join; it was the only duty that gave them any satisfaction in life any more.

In mimicry of the Iron Hands' brotherhood, the skin of the thrall's left hand gleamed with the filigree tracery of electroo circuits. The implanted circuitry marked the thralls out as members in part of the Iron Hands' Chapter but was nothing like as magnificent as the bionics the battle-brothers were granted on translation from neophyte to initiate of the order. It was also a constant reminder of their place within the mighty Chapter - that they were members of the servile underclass, duty-bound to wait upon their overlords' every whim. They could never receive the honour that could have been theirs on the battlefield, only bask in the reflected glory of those who had passed the initiation trials and successfully endured the many surgical procedures that made them Space Marines.

'What?' Gdolkon asked bluntly, the tone of his voice expressed in that one word suggesting that he too knew full well the feudal position of the thrall within the social structure of the Iron Hands' Chapter and that the wretched man would do well to remember it too. His neuro-linked servo-arm twitched irritably.

The Iron-Fathers had more respect for their mindless servitor-drone bodyguards than they did for the Chapter's thralls, viewing the slave-machines as marvellous creations of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the thralls as the lowest of the low who, through their failure to pass the trials

and rigours of initiation, had demonstrated themselves guilty of giving in to the greatest failing, weakness itself.

'Your pardon, my lord Gdolkin, but a meeting of the great clan council has been called and the clan masters have asked that you attend,' the thrall said, hardly daring to face the cruel gaze of the Iron-Father.

Gdolkin rose from the operating slab, detaching auspex cables and medicae connectors with both fully functioning augmetic hands. Caduceus watched him carefully.

A meeting of the great council. Such a thing was an uncommon event, only happening when the whole Chapter was called to war to make good the ancient vows every initiate swore, to protect and uphold the Imperium, or when the safety of the Iron Hands' homeworld itself was threatened. And for Gdolkin to be called to attend was an honour indeed. It spoke of potentially great things, when he could demonstrate his strength of will and body in service of the Immortal Emperor Enthroned.

'Tell the council I shall be with them presently,' he said.

'You should rest,' the Apothecary said. The medicae drones buzzed around the Space Marine medic's head, their anxious, darting movements reflecting Caduceus's concern for the wellbeing of his patient. 'You have just undergone surgery.'

'Minor surgery, Apothecary.'

'But surgery nonetheless. And your body needs time to recover and adjust. Take an hour at least. A day would be better.'

'I can't keep the council waiting.' Gdolkin said flatly, turned his back on Caduceus and marched out of the apothecarion.

IRON-FATHER GDOLKIN left the apothecarion, his servitor bodyguard falling into line behind him automatically, without a word from their master. Their pre-programmed logic subroutines took effect as soon as Gdolkin moved past them, resuming the pattern they would normally follow when accompanying the Space Marine on his business aboard the fortress-monastery *Weyland*. Brother-Apothecary Caduceus followed his charge as the Iron-Father strode from the chirurgia, the two servo-skulls still keeping pace with him, hovering two metres above the stone flagged floor of the passageway on their anti-grav suspensor units.

The stately party moved at striding pace through the ancient land-behemoth, following the broad, alcove-lined corridors - each alcove

bearing an electrotorch-lit statue of one of the heroes of the Vur-gaan clan company, who had given their lives in the service of their Chapter and their Emperor. There were noble commanders, doughty Iron-Fathers, majestic Librarians and even noted Apothecaries, all rendered in bronze Imperial eagle-wings and battle-honour bionics picked out in the finest platinum filigree, electrum plating and gold leaf.

Some of the alcoves housed the massive forms of mighty dreadnoughts, their hulking, imposing forms immortalised by the sculptor's art for all eternity, captured in dramatic battle poses, so that an observer could easily imagine their assault cannons, plasma weapons and storm bolters raking the enemy with gunfire, whilst their scything blades and crushing power-claws brought low the weak and unworthy before them.

And there were many such heroes, for the Chapter had a history as long as the Imperium itself, ten thousand years of heroic deeds, apocalyptic battles and holy crusades. The tides of the warp had taken the Iron Hands far from their homeworld of Medusa. For much of the time the clan companies lived a nomadic existence, travelling aboard their mighty starfaring battle barges and strike cruisers, much like the wandering tribes who scraped a living from the harsh world that the Iron Hands still called home.

Gdolkon passed between the adamantium pillars of another portal and entered the *Weyland's* council chamber.

The vast, vaulted cathedral space was lit by hovering candelabra that cast peculiar bars of light and shadow across the huge clan symbol suspended beneath the central span of the ceiling vault. The means by which the massive insignia remained suspended, rotating slowly, above the council chamber was a secret still preserved by the techno-magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The servants of the Machine God of Mars had built the vast land-behemoth, as large and as threatening as a mobile volcanic crater, in return for some debt owed by them that had occurred in ages past. Only a few amongst the most ancient and revered of the brothers of the Chapter, encased forever more in the adamantium shells of their dreadnought war machines, knew what the debt was but it was enough for the Iron Hands to know that there was a special bond between the Adeptus Mechanicus and Sons of Ferrus Manus.

The symbol was in the shape of a huge toothed-cog, twenty metres across, which denoted the Iron Hands' Chapter's connection to the

mysterious galaxy-spanning Machine Cult. At the icon's centre was the lightning strike of the Vurgaan clan, raised in bas-relief, to which Gdolkin had belonged ever since he had been recruited by the Iron Hands, following his fateful encounter in the ruins of the Ancients' city within the Land of Shadows.

Each Iron Hands' Space Marine still retained a strong bond to his clan.

Ancient, age-faded heraldic banners bearing the heraldry of a thousand notaries of the Vurgaan clan and ten thousand campaigns, amongst them the chalice and broken blade of the Grailsword Crusade against the enigmatic eldar and the burning hive-spire motif of the Third War for Armageddon. The banners stirred in the breeze from the air scrubbers, frayed gold thread sparkling like distant star clusters in the haze of the ceiling gloom.

The Iron Hands' Chapter, and by extension the Vurgaan clan, had a long and noble history, of which its brothers were rightly proud. But the clansmen were also proud of their clan and kept themselves apart from the other nine clan companies that made up their Chapter when war did not dictate that they fight together. For the Iron Hands of the Vurgaan clan were as likely to meet their fellows from the other clans in internecine disputes on their own world as they were to fight alongside them against their mutual enemies of the alien, the daemon and the heretic, who would confound the Emperor's galaxy- and eon-spanning plan.

In ages past the tribesmen had fought each other for the best hunting grounds, the most valuable mining claims and the least active of the earthquake-tormented lands. The primarch, the Emperor and Omnissiah keep him, had decreed that this proud martial tradition should continue, that his sons might forever test themselves in battle and struggle against each other to eradicate the weak from among their number, fighting their own physical failings as much as they were fighting each other.

The Medusa system being so close to the Eye of Terror - that visceral maelstrom of warp-realspace overlap - all that the universe had to offer the Iron Hands' Chapter in the dying years of the forty-first millennium was an eternity of war. That was why the primarch had decreed in ages past that the only life his sons would know was one of constant battle. And that was why their primarch and all the warleaders and Iron-Fathers since had demanded that the Iron Hands should strive to eradicate all weakness and physical frailty from their already enhanced, biogenically-enhanced physiques.

And that was why the Chapter favoured the use of bionics and augmetics so much more readily than some orders of the Adeptus Astartes. If the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak, then the flesh had to be replaced by something stronger.

But what demanded Gdolkin's attention were not the ancient battle-banners or the esoteric secrets of the Mechanicus's technomancy but the ten imposing figures standing in the centre of the vast chamber, intimidating in their stance and stature, exuding authority. They were all giants by the measure of men and even other Space Marines, but three of them were true leviathans of war.

The dreadnoughts were the epitome of what an Iron Hand wished to become. They inspired awe and respectful reverence in equal measure in their younger brethren, with the weight of centuries that they carried upon their broad adamantium shoulders. They had been in the service of the immortal God-Emperor for thousands of years.

As ancient warriors, they were revered and highly esteemed. Encased in the sarcophagus of their dreadnought armour, they served the Emperor forever more in His battle against the forces of Chaos. Centuries of warfare had granted them wisdom like no others amongst their Chapter.

They were the tempered voice of reason amongst the clan companies and the more impetuous, hotheaded leaders. Their age and their great deeds were respected; their battle prowess, tactical skill and mastery of strategy revered. When one of the venerable dreadnoughts spoke, the Iron Hands listened, as though their very lives depended on it - which of course they did.

Gdolkin's servitor entourage came to a halt at the edge of the vast chamber as the Iron-Father approached the group gathered at the centre, standing on the white marble and black onyx image of the iron hand. Out of the corners of his eyes - both augmetic and organic - Gdolkin could see other servitors, honour guards and tech-thralls waiting in silence in the gloom around the edges of the vaulted space.

The leaders of the ten united clan companies were arrayed in a circle before Gdolkin, with a space for him to join them. He took each one in turn.

To his right stood Dozeph Imanol of the Raukaan clan. Although the iron-commander had removed his helmet the top of his head was still a reinforced metallic dome that reflected the light of the glow-globes from

its polished surface. It looked like some master artificer had added detailing on the metal cranium, covering it with a labyrinth of folds that made it appear as if the Space Marine's brain had been exposed. Imanol's eyes were also steely, red-lensed augmetics but below them there was little exposed metalwork.

Next to Imanol stood Pelles, clan-commander of Gdolkin's own company, the Vurgaan clan. Pelles was not a handsome man, and his closely trimmed beard and black clan tattoos did nothing to improve his appearance. He sported two solid metal studs that had been hammered into his skull above his left eye, denoting over two hundred years of sanctified service to the Chapter, the same as Gdolkin. In fact, the two of them had risen through the ranks together. But where Gdolkin had demonstrated an affinity with the ancient machine spirits of the Chapter's weaponry and attack vehicles from his early days as an initiate, Pelles's tactical skill and ability to read a battle had marked him out as a commander in the making: a potential that had been fulfilled in the heat of battle on the planet Haissem, fighting the piratical eldar, and later verified by the veterans of the Vurgaan clan and the great clan council itself.

Pelles's armoured suit hid a plethora of manufactured organ and limb replacements; he was revered by the other battle-brothers of the Vurgaan clan for coming so close to the Iron Hands' ideal of the machine. The only other brother who came close to his achievement was Iron-Father Gdolkin himself.

Pelles was tall, even for a Space Marine, standing over two and a half metres in his power armour, but towering over the iron-commander, like some leviathan monster from the legendary trials of Ferrus Manus, was the first of three dreadnought-armoured battle-brothers. The name inscribed on the ornamental scroll-work on the dreadnought's sarcophagus read "Talumech".

Although Gdolkin was himself a bold, confident warrior, he was awed and cowed by the presence of, not one, but three venerable dreadnought brothers. It was rumoured that there were only eight such ancient battle-suits in existence within the entirety of the Iron Hands' Chapter.

The dreadnought's magnificent adamantium body gleamed dully in the reduced lighting of the fortress monastery's council chamber. On the right-hand panel of the dreadnought's adamantium casing was a bas-relief image of a clawed iron gauntlet, the millennia-old insignia of the Iron Hands'

order. The image was not unlike the monstrous power fist that the dreadnought bore on the end of its left arm.

Just as the battle-brothers of the Iron Hands had their left hands replaced with bionic replicas on being inducted into the Chapter, so the left arm of every dreadnought was always equipped with a close combat weapon, with a built-in storm bolter. The right arm of each machine was another matter, however. These were outfitted with such armaments as assault cannons, multi-melta attachments, heavy bolters and devastating plasma weaponry. In the case of Dreadnought Talumech, a twin-linked lascannon stood in place of a right arm.

The great machines were an inspiration to all within the Chapter and the dreaded bane of their enemies. To face one of these ancient, black-hulled colossi was to stare the vengeful wrath of the Emperor in the face.

The next clan-leader Gdolkin did not recognise. He was still helmeted but what marked him out from the other council members was the fact that from the waist down his body was entirely cybernetic, his legs formed like piston-powered pile-drivers. However, he, like Gdolkin, had an additional, robotic arm arching over his back, such as the Techmarines of other Chapters bore. The stylised wrench that formed part of the design on his right shoulder plate marked him out as being from the Sorrgol clan. Gdolkin had not met this Iron Hand before but he had heard of Iron-Father Bartolk's demise on Malbolge IV and that his replacement was one Orban Lomax.

Then there was a brother in full Terminator armour, although he too was unhelmeted, his dark hair cropped short, a skull-drone sporting an array of augury and auspex scanners hovering in the air at his shoulder, the units of its grav-assembly humming softly. One knee was entirely artificial, as was the entirety of his right arm. Gdolkin recognised who he was by reputation alone. This man surely could only be Brother Avidan. Gdolkin had never fought alongside him personally, even in over two hundred years of campaigning, from the far reaches of the Segmentum Tempestus to the burning shores of Armageddon, as a fully invested Space Marine.

The sixth of the gathered clan chiefs was bald, like Gdolkin. His nose, mouth and chin were covered by a rebreather unit built into the chest plate of his power armour. The Iron-Father's enhanced senses picked up the

regular wheezing groan of lung pumps coming from the rebreather, as spent air was exhaled through the venting grilles.

Next to him, rigid and unmoving like one of the statues Gdolkin had passed in the Gallery of Heroes on his way to the council chamber, leg units braced, standing like a guardian sentinel, was the second dreadnought, Warleader Bannus. Here, truly, was one of the ancient warriors of legend. The renowned pre-eminent Iron-Father of his age, Paullian Blantar, inspiration to the Kaargul clan company for many centuries, had performed the tech-surgery that bound Bannus to this dreadnought body, in the aftermath of the dark eldar attack on the industrial world of Kaladrone. He had been an integral member of the great clan council for longer than Gdolkin had been an Iron Hand, and his great wisdom and valuable experience continued to benefit the Chapter as a whole.

Bannus's left arm sported a chainfist with incorporated storm bolter; his right was a huge assault cannon attachment. On a banner pole rising from the back of his hulking adamantium body Bannus bore his personal clan heraldry.

Standing between the hulking war machine and another on the other side was a Space Marine in adapted Terminator armour, lightning sparking in the shadows cast by the two dreadnoughts. As Gdolkin looked he thought he saw the Librarian's eyes flash and a nimbus of crackling eldritch energy play about the circuit-inlaid hood surrounding his head.

Then there was the third of the inspiring war-walker machines, Venerated Axagoras. His campaigns against the alien ksathra and sheed of the Durian subsector were the stuff of legend, almost as much so as the fabulous deeds of Ferrus Manus himself. New aspirant Iron Hands were indoctrinated with the battle tactics and strategies he had developed during the Xerxes Campaign as part of their initiation into the ancient, noble Chapter. The gleaming manifold of a plasma cannon protruded from the goliath's right arm mounting.

The tenth of the veteran warriors of the Chapter sported an entirely augmetic left arm and had a thunder hammer slung at his side. His face was knotted and twisted by bio-acid burns. From where he was standing, Gdolkin could clearly see that the back of this man's head had been replaced by a riveted, burnished steel skull-cap. The exposed edges of the

vac-seal collar of his torso armour, his elbow joints and kneepads were finished with gold. Again, Gdolkin did not recognise this esteemed leader.

Each one of these great men, and even greater dreadnoughts, represented the marshalled might of one whole clan company. Between them they represented the united strength of an entire Adeptus Astartes Chapter, over a thousand of the most ruthless, super-engineered creatures in the whole, vast Imperium of Man. And they had chosen Gdolkin to bear the responsibility of successfully completing their exceptional mission.

In turn, the ten council members studied Iron-Father Gdolkin closely.

He was bald-headed. Above his scar-cut right eyebrow two metal studs denoted the centuries of devoted service he had given his Chapter. The feathering of a tribal tattoo fanned out from around his still-organic eye. Details of his armour were finished with burnished gold and polished steel skulls. The iron gauntlet badge of his Chapter, set between a pair of golden eagle wings, was picked out in white gold and red paint.

Gdolkin held his individually adapted helmet at his side. He had modified it himself. It was a masterly crafted piece of armour, its faceplate complementing the bionic implants of his head. The helm's right eye-slit was a vertically elongated red oblong, marrying exactly with the shape of the Iron-Father's optical augmentic. He had lost the eye long ago, fighting the enigmatic hrud on the moons of Gomrath.

'Greetings, Iron-Father Gdolkin,' said a booming voice, redolent with age. It was Warleader Bannus who spoke.

Gdolkin maintained the expression of grim resolve on his half-organic features but inside his hearts-beat doubled. Venerable Warleader Bannus himself had addressed him. Despite being an Iron-Father of some standing amongst his own clan and the Chapter as a whole, at that moment Gdolkin felt like a neophyte again. Awe and pride swelled his chest. And this conclave had been convened aboard the *Weyland*. Something gravely serious was afoot.

'Greetings, my lords,' Gdolkin said humbly, bowing his head slightly as he did so, the appendage of his servo-arm also describing a graceful sweep.

'I expect you are wondering why you have been called to this conclave of iron.' Venerable Bannus went on.

'But of course, my lord.' Gdolkin said fixing his eyes on the massive dreadnought that dwarfed the other assembled Iron Hands' leaders.

'But of course.' Bannus echoed. 'But before we tell you the reason, you should know what has caused us to convene this council meeting. Librarian Madeus?'

The Iron Hands psyker stepped forward, out of the shadow of the dreadnoughts. He immediately stood out from his counterparts, not merely because of the archaic psychic hood surrounding his head and the crackling lightning discharging around his skull, but because of his suit of Terminator armour.

'Iron-Father, the Imperium is facing the darkest threat it has confronted in the ten thousand years since the great betrayal of the Horus Heresy. Both the physical galaxy and the unreal universe of the warp are in turmoil. We have read this in the ether. The myriad forces of Chaos are even now being vomited forth from the Chaos maelstrom that is the Eye of Terror, united under one despotic commander, one who fought our forebears at the gates of Terra one hundred centuries ago. The one known as the Despoiler.'

'Abaddon.' Gdolkkin gasped involuntarily, so great was his horror. He felt a wave of nauseous dread wash through him, just at the mention of the Chaos despot's name. There had not been a commander of the Despoiler's stature since Horus, the Great Traitor himself. Anger followed as he considered how even now his physical body caused him to have such reactions, producing hormones and chemicals over which he had no control.

'You are correct,' Librarian Madeus confirmed, reading Gdolkkin's troubled expression, and possibly his surface thoughts as well. 'From our reading of the Imperial record, this is the Despoiler's thirteenth Black Crusade.'

The Black Crusades. Again Gdolkkin shivered involuntarily and then screwed up his face in a snarl of anger at the frailty of his body. The motto of all Space Marines, whatever Chapter they might hail from, was, 'They shall show no fear, for they are fear incarnate.' And yet at the thought of one of the great enemy's heretical crusades a Space Marine felt the cold grip of fear - he did not normally feel - take hold and shake him to his very core, in the face of losing everything that he and his forebears had fought for ten long millennia to maintain, since the time of the immortal Emperor's own Great Crusade.

It took all the prayers and acts of devotion he could muster to focus his mind and quell such feelings. But still at the very centre of his being there remained a kernel of doubt, lurking there like a cancerous growth.

There had been twelve before in the long history of the Imperium and there were the lost and ravaged worlds to attest to that fact. The greatest Black Crusade to date, and from the Imperium's perspective the worst, had been the Gothic War, more than eight hundred years ago.

'The Cadian Gate and Fortress Cadia itself seem to be the Despoiler's main target, for that world appears to be the focus of some great power that holds the Chaotic tides and storms of the warp at bay, allowing safe passage for ships throughout the outlying sectors, and possibly even holds back the expansion of the Eye itself.' Pelles explained.

'But we cannot dismiss the fact that any Imperial territories bordering the Eye of Terror could come under attack by the rampaging Chaos hordes and our world itself will face a full frontal attack, simply because of the threat it poses to the enemy due to the presence here of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter.'

'There is nothing the enemy desires more than to be revenged upon those who remained loyal to the Emperor during the Heresy.' Axagoras rumbled.

'Then I take it that the defence of Medusa is our prime concern in this coming conflict.' Gdolkon stated. 'What mission would you have me undertake to further this goal?'

'You are correct, of course. The defence of Medusa is our prime concern at this time.' Dozeph Imanol confirmed.

'But the role you must fulfil in the coming conflict cannot be here on Medusa.' Iron-Commander Pelles stated firmly, no hint of appeasement in his tone or his expression. This was just how it was going to be.

Gdolkon felt a melange of shock, surprise, anger and confusion vie for control within him. Was he to be denied the honour, nay the very right, to defend his own homeworld? The Iron Hands were nothing without Medusa, their mother world. It was she who formed them to become the strongest and most inde-fatigable of all the Adeptus Astartes Chapters, just as the harsh planet had shaped Ferrus Manus, their primarch. 'But my lords—' Gdolkon began, composing himself. 'There are strategies in place to defend our world,' the warleader said, ignoring Gdolkon's protests, his voice sounding even more artificial than the voxponder-distorted ones of

the dreadnoughts. 'You have a part to play elsewhere.' Gdolkin said nothing.

Now it was Brother Avidan's turn to speak. 'We have received an astropathic message from the Adeptus Mechanicus based on the forge world of Fornax Orbis Majoris. The Chaos forces have already made devastating advances in their initial push throughout the Achilles subsector. The forge world is besieged by traitors from within the billions-strong indentured workforce on the planet as well as by the traitor brethren of the corrupted Death Guard. The Adeptus Mechanicus there have requested our aid for what they describe as a vital mission.' Avidan offered this information as if by way of explanation even though Gdolkin had asked for none.

'Regiments of the Imperial Guard have been deployed on Fornax Orbis Majoris.' Imanol added, his tone almost scoffing, 'but unsurprisingly the servants of the Machine God there tell us that their position is becoming untenable. They need the aid of true warriors, the Emperor's finest, the Adeptus Astartes.'

'So, what is this mission?' Gdolkin asked coldly.

'Ever suspicious and clandestine about their affairs, at this time the Adeptus Mechanicus have not yet revealed the details of the mission to us. However.' Avidan went on, 'in their correspondence with our Chapter the tech-magi have made use of highly secret passwords and called on ancient oaths made between the Iron Hands and their organisation in ages past. What they have revealed to us is that the success of this mission could make all the difference regarding the Imperium's retaliation against the Despoiler's thirteenth Black Crusade.'

'We would sooner not lend any of our warriors to this cause.' Warleader Bannus boomed, 'but we are bound by ancient oaths made by our forefathers millennia ago, and we, as a Chapter, owe a great deal to the servants of the Cult Mechanicus. There are already two of our clan companies committed to countering the enemy's crusade attack plans elsewhere. The pressing need to defend our own world means that we can only spare a relatively small force, but I am sure that it will be more than enough to break the siege.'

'You have been chosen to lead a hand-picked force to forge world Fornax.' Pelles, Gdolkin's direct superior, stated matter-of-factly. 'Once

there you are to rendezvous with Tech-Priest Magos Omega Thule and put yourself and your men under his command.'

'I am sure that you, Iron-Father Gdolk, and those you choose to take with you, will be more than up to the job.' Iron-Father Orban Lomax said coolly.

'My lords, I feel that I should remain on Medusa, defending my homeworld from the predations of Chaos.'

'This mission could halt the Despoiler's advance and help drive his armies back into the Eye of Terror.' Avidan said.

'This is not a request!' the dreadnought Talumech suddenly roared, speaking for the first time. 'You have been chosen, Iron-Father, and it is your place to obey and see that the Emperor's will is done.'

'Yes, my lord Talumech.' Gdolk said bluntly. Rage began to boil within him but he kept it contained. If the situation was as severe as the council claimed his place was here on Medusa.

'To refuse could only be taken as a sign of weakness.' Imanol declared.

'And I did not take you to be that kind of man.' Bannus's voice, still loud and booming but the tone calming.

Weakness, Gdolk riled. That was not a trait he would allow himself to be accused of and neither would he give in to that potentially fatal flaw.

'I did not believe you would let your clan down.' Pelles said coldly.

Gdolk breathed deeply and felt his servo-arm flex as if with barely contained rage.

He was a Chaplain-Techmarine of the noble Iron Hands' Chapter. He would not have anyone accuse him of weakness. He would prove to them all that he could be counted as one of the strongest amongst them. He would go to this Emperor-forsaken forge world and complete this mission, and return to Medusa a hero, ready to save his homeworld from destruction.

'I accept this mission, with grace, my lords.' Gdolk said, biting the words he really wanted to say, particularly to Iron-Commander Pelles.

'Then so be it.' Warleader Bannus pronounced. 'Iron-Father Gdolk, you will lead a contingent of Iron Hands to aid the Adeptus Mechanicus on Fornax Orbis Majoris in their defence of that world, to rendezvous with Magos Omega Thule and serve him as he so demands. I declare that this is the decision of this great clan council and it is our judgement of iron. Let none break it. For Ferrus Manus and Medusa!'

'For Ferrus Manus and Medusa!' the other nine clan representatives echoed.

'For Ferrus Manus and Medusa.' Gdolkín muttered, the words like bile in his mouth.

And with that, the silently furious Iron-Father turned his back on the great clan council and strode from the council chamber to prepare for war, his servitor bodyguard falling into line again behind him.

He would return, Gdolkín vowed, and soon, before Medusa fell to the claws of Chaos. He swore it by the primarch, by the Emperor and by his mother-world herself. Medusa would not fall.

FORNAX ORBIS MAJORIS

'What do I ask of my officers? Merely that they do their duty with fire in their bellies and a prayer on their lips!'

- Lord Castellan Ursarkar E. Creed

THREE

FORNAX RISING

**MANUFACTORY DISTRICT XII, FERROTURITUS PRIME,
DEPTUS MECHANICUS FORGE WORLD FORNAX ORBIS
MAJORIS**

COILS OF CLAMMY brown smoke drifted through the blasted ruins. Black water collected in the crater pits. And the rain continued to fall, sizzling as it hit the ground, sending puffs of acrid vapour into the toxic air from the dark puddles. Fires burned within the wreckage of the manufactory, adding their fummy black smoke to the pollution already tainting the air with its bitter chemical taste.

Sergeant Vessig of the Cadian 108th - the Wyverns - looked out across the broken carcass of the tank manufactory and caught sight of the enemy. They were advancing in small, squad-sized groups, but each one of them was a hulking giant of a warrior.

Vessig and his squad were hunkered down inside the splintered shell of an abandoned operations tower. Their position gave them an unhindered view of the ruins to the south for almost five kilometres, the sergeant reckoned. Unhindered, that was, apart for the ceaseless smog cascading

over the barrage-formed wasteland. It was between breaks in the roiling, polluted mist that the Cadians could see the enemy advance through the ruins. From here the squad had a sniper's view of District XII. They could take pot shots at the enemy from their position.

Trooper Hacker was the man for that task, Vessig considered, but such an action now would compromise their position, and besides, Vessig was not sure how much of an impact their las-shots would make on the heavily armoured forms moving towards them from such a distance. No - better to harry the enemy from up close, surprising them from amidst the smoke and shadows of the manufactory wrecks.

And yet, despite their advantageous position, the Cadians still hadn't been able to clearly make out the nature of the enemy moving steadily towards the Imperial lines six kilometres behind them. What were they going to find out there in the polluted hellhole of District XII?

Having taken a fix on the positions of the advancing enemy scout units, Squad Vessig descended the operations tower via rusted wall ladders and shattered rockcrete staircases until they were out in the warren of the manufactory complex again. Ranpol and Irving having checked that the way ahead was clear, the squad emerged from the base of the tower into a street that ran parallel to a huge pipeline that rose above the manufactory district in now-disconnected segments.

Casting a glance over his shoulder, Vessig motioned his squad forward with a sharp jab of his hand. Troopers Palno and Dundas jogged past him, lasguns held low, ready to fire in an instant.

He watched as they took up positions within the cover provided by the broken rubble and sheet iron of the manufactory. In the smoke and under the shadowy pall cast by the pollution-clogged sky, the Guardsmen melded into their surroundings, their dirt smeared urban camo gear doing its job perfectly. Any enemy approaching their position would be unaware of their presence until too late.

With Saul on point and the others keeping a regimented five metres between them and the man in front, smoothly, and making as little noise as possible, the squad exited the machine temple entering the warren of alleyways and access roads of the District XII complex.

They were advancing along what had once been a ferrocreted roadway running between the factories, although it was now little more than a rutted and pitted mess of broken rubble, scorched road surface and shell-

churned mud. Twisted beams that had once formed the metal skeletons of the manufactory buildings lay strewn across the accessway so that Sergeant Vessig and his men had to clamber over girders and through the spaces between broken beams, like negotiating the web of some mechanical arachnid.

Progress was made slower by the network of metal mesh because at irregular intervals the fallen girders obscured the Guardsmen's view of the way ahead as much as the rolling smoke and chemical smog. The men had to take turns to cover one another as they scouted their way cautiously forward.

They were alone out here, as far as Vessig knew. Long-range vox was down and they had lost contact with Squad Servius. They did not know whether Guard HQ had been overrun or destroyed by the enemy barrages. And until Sergeant Vessig and his troopers found out one way or another for sure, they would continue with their primary objective: to harry the enemy and prevent them from gaining any more ground in this district of Ferroturitus Prime.

For this was what it was to be a Guardsman of the Cadian 108th. In fact this was what it was to be a Cadian, and it was this stoical attitude that had earned them such a reputation within the Imperial Guard, for unrelenting bravery and honourable action in the face of overwhelming odds. In a galaxy-spanning army that numbered in the billions, the name they bore was synonymous with the best.

So the squad continued, for all Vessig knew, the only ones still alive out in the ruins. If it hadn't been for the distant pounding of the artillery behind Imperial lines the Cadian sergeant could have easily believed that they were the only loyalists still alive on the whole cultist-overrun planet.

THE 108TH HAD been called in following disturbing developments on the forge world. Normally the population of Fornax Orbis Majoris - indentured workers, tech-adepts and mindless servitors - was busily employed producing the weapons with which the armies of half a dozen systems were supplied.

But with the opening of the Eye, plague had broken out on Fornax.

This was no ordinary plague that could be tended to by the medicae of the Administratum or even the genetor-magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus. This was a sickness of the soul. This was the same affliction that had

infected dozens, if not hundreds, of worlds surrounding the Eye of Terror, if rumour were correct. This was what the Imperial forces had termed the Plague of Unbelief.

And it was a plague that could only be ministered to by the death-dealing weapons of the righteous. It was a canker that had to be excised like a malignant tumour from an infected body, a disease that had to be purged with the Emperor's light, manifest in purifying flames.

With the rise of the plague, cultist cells had taken the opportunity to put into action their long held plans. All across the northern continent of Fornax servants of the Dark Powers had revealed themselves, the cultists coming from all walks of life, all strata of Imperial society and all branches of the Imperial machine. Downtrodden worker ratings had turned on their overseers and then taken up their tools to use as weapons against their former masters.

But that was almost to be expected of those among the lowest in Imperial society, Vessig considered. However, what had come as an even more devastating blow was when fully half of the Planetary Defence Force had turned traitor, the uniform that had once displayed the holy aquila of the Imperium with pride now defaced and daubed with blasphemous sigils and unholy symbols. The marks of cruel eight-pointed stars and stranger, indescribable runes were carved directly into their own living flesh.

Even tech-priests had turned on their masters, transferring their loyalties from the Omnissiah to the abyssal rulers of the warp.

And then, as the plague and the rebellion both seemed to reach their height, there had come the unholy servants of the Lord of Pestilence and Disease himself. Looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight, the cultist uprising and the outbreak of the plague had almost precisely coincided with the arrival of the plague fleet.

Their ships had appeared on the planet's observation station surveyor screens like pus-ripe buboes. The Chaos fleets of Nurgle's own Death Guard. These putrescent plague ships had launched the first barrage from space, an orbital strike that wiped out a third of the remaining faithful PDF and tech-guard forces already stationed on the planet.

Then the rebels had joined the attack on those precious few who remained loyal to the Emperor, launching their own barrages using tanks and gun platforms newly birthed from the enemy-held factories and

immediately put into the service of the very blackguards they had been built to be used against.

Ships had been dispatched from other nearby Mechanicus outposts, with full complements of tech-guard, and engaged the Chaos fleet in orbit before delivering their precious cargos of men and weapons.

These included six tank companies and even, Guard rumour had it once again, one of the legendary Ordinatus engines of the tech-magi of Mars.

In the wake of the sudden, disastrous, order-toppling uprising, forces had been called in to help the remaining beleaguered PDF units quell the uprising. Sector command had to ensure that Fornax did not fall to the forces of Chaos, and then had to try to reestablish the supply chains of vehicles and weaponry being shipped from the forge world to the frontline warzones - of which Fornax Orbis Majoris had now become a part - as quickly as possible.

That was why the Wyverns had found their troop transport redirected at the command of the master magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus from its passage from Kaynar VI to Celestino in the Veritas system. Their transport ran the gauntlet of the Chaos ships still in orbit over Fornax, then, escorted by two frigates of the Navis Nobilite, the dropships of the 108th had descended on the northern continent of Fornax inside one of the protected industrialised areas still under loyalist Imperial control, along with the Tradaran Rifles and the Joparin 24th Cavalry.

Within the day the Cadians had been deployed south-west into one of the most toughly contested planetary sectors, to assist the Imperial forces trying to hold back the enemy forces laying siege to the manufactory complex two hundred kilometres square, designated Ferroturitus Prime by the Adeptus Mechanicus forge-masters.

So it was that Sergeant Vessig found himself and his squad cut off from Imperial Command in the no-man's-land of the levelled tank manufactory with the enemy closing in on their position. And as far as Vessig could tell, the whole sector was going to hell.

THERE WAS A skittering noise, like shifting gravel, from somewhere nearby. The fog, along with Vessig's own helmet and rebreather, made it almost impossible for him to tell precisely where the noise had come from. Instinctively he brought his lasgun up to his shoulder ready to take a bead on any emerging target in an instant.

Vessig reminded himself that there were other things out here in the rains, other than the loyalist Guardsmen and the enemy they were stalking. There always were on these Mechanicus worlds, in Vessig's experience, and their presence was even more likely on a world like this, under attack from the forces of Chaos. Rodent scavengers, mutated by the toxins pumped out into the environment by the relentless manufactories. Forgotten, obsolete servitors, their programmes corrupted, carrying out procedures that no longer served any purpose. Strange, mechanical things, robotic drones fashioned from skulls of the faithful dead, with a life of their own, going about their own inscrutable business.

There was the sound again.

At another sign from their sergeant, the squad slipped into cover at the edges of the rubble-strewn roadway.

This particular manufactory had been laid out on a grid system and covered an area, Vessig guessed, of some ten kilometres square. The initial enemy bombardment had flattened much of the factory plant. Here and there fractured archways and splintered rockcrete columns still stood, rising through the hazy grey fog like trees of the prehistoric forests that had once flourished on this planet. Before them was another of the many right-angled junctions in the service road grid-system. The ferrocrete service-way broke off east and west in front of the rains of another massive cathedral-like structure. The roof was a criss-cross of blackened spars and only one of the two spires remained at all.

The Cadians' view of the road junction beyond was obscured by a large masonry block that had once formed the corner of a maintenance shed.

With his men covering his back, Vessig approached the junction cautiously, laying each booted foot down carefully, so as not to attract the attention of whatever waited around the corner of the ruin.

There was a sharp squeal and a creature the size of a Cadian wolfhound scurried out into the road. But this was no dog. Once, it might have been a rat, but now it was something else entirely, mutated almost beyond recognition into a vile, oversized scavenger. Long spines protruded from the vertebrae of the creature's back whilst its mouth was malformed by tusk-like fangs. Green tinged fur clung to its lean form in wet clumps but in places patches of bare, scabrous skin were also visible. The long hairless, white tail that lashed behind it ended in a cruel-looking sting.

Before he was really aware of what he was looking at, Sergeant Vessig fired. The creature's sudden movement and the sharp sound of its squeal had been enough to trigger instinctive reactions born of a lifetime of rifle training.

The shot rang out through the ruins only to be muffled by the enveloping fog. The silence that came after it was worse than the lonely crack of the lasgun.

The mutant rat dropped, smoke rising from a large, cauterised wound that had opened up one whole side of its lank body.

Vessig's heart pounded and his breathing was shallow. He shouldn't be reacting like this. He was a sergeant of the Cadian 108th Wyverns! He had obviously been feeling more tense about the situation than he had consciously realised. Vessig offered a prayer of thanks to the Emperor following it with a supplication for the guidance of Him on Earth, then signalled his squad forward again.

The large frame of Trooper Closs moved past him, followed by Katsulas.

Vessig heard a sharp hiss, like the sound a sewer snake would make, a split second before Katsulas raised his lasgun as he shouldered the larger, slower Closs out of the way. Something else was emerging from the shadows and smoke around the corner of the road junction.

The shambling figure was clad in the overalls of an indentured worker. It dragged its feet clumsily as if it was unused to making such a manoeuvre. Then, in a movement that was more reminiscent of a snake, the worker lashed out at the Guardsmen with filthy hands that clasped like claws. Katsulas fired, putting a las-bolt through the front of the worker's skull and blowing out the back of his head in a puff of blood and bone shrapnel.

The worker fell forward, the talons of its dead hands tearing the rubber mask of Katsulas's rebreather from his face. The Guardsman took a sudden shocked breath, which caught in his throat and became a strangled cough.

Sergeant Vessig took all this in at a glance. Ignoring Katsulas, he took the corner at a run as Closs, his flamer unslung from his shoulder, hosed whatever waited along the service-way with burning promethium. The sound of the flamer was like the throaty roar of some leviathan fire-breathing reptile, and it drowned out the background booms of the Imperial artillery for the Guardsmen close to Closs. It was better to leave a

man down and deal with the still active threat, than to stop to help one man and lose others, or your own life, in the process. You could always come back to help him once the threat had been neutralised.

What he saw in front of him chilled him to the marrow and etched itself forever onto his mind in the split second it took him to realise what he was looking at. A pack of abominations, like the one Katsulas had just brought down, were huddled over a bundle of rags. As Gloss's flamer immolated one of the overall-clad workers, Vessig took in the horrific nature of the things before them.

They were all still partially dressed in their torn manufactorum uniforms, dirty brown overalls with large numerals on their left breast denoting that they had belonged to the District XII workforce. Through tears in the fabric Vessig could see pallid grey skin, tinged with a green discoloration like mould. Even more horribly, in places discoloured purple-black viscera bulged through raptured flesh. Their flesh also bore the stigmata of plague. It was obviously not only the Plague of Unbelief that had taken hold within this polluted hellhole.

One of the abominations raised its head and bared broken, blackened teeth in a vicious snarl. Its eyes met Vessig's. They seemed to glow with a malevolent intensity. Its face had been scarred by the acidic rainfall and even by rodent bite marks. On the half of its head that had not been gnawed down to the bone was an unkempt mess of hair and weeping sores. These abominations looked more like living, rotting corpses than men.

Vessig's shot took the creature's head off at the neck, and its body crumpled into an untidy heap on the road.

It was then that Vessig realised what it was that the zombie-things had been fighting with the rats over. The rags partially disguised the remains of a tech-worker, the gleam of chrome visible where the vermin and plague-infected zombies had eaten the flesh from around the dead adept's augmetics.

It was all over in a matter of moments. The pack had numbered only seven; against ten highly trained Guardsmen armed with lasguns and a flamer the zombie workers didn't have a hope.

Saul, the most devoutly religious of the squad, made the sign of the aquila over his chest. The pack was now nothing more than smouldering corpses and dismembered body parts. But the horror of the situation alone could have been enough to overwhelm the squad.

The threat neutralised, Vessig broke vox silence for the first time since they had lost contact with Squad Servius, to assess his squad's condition.

'Report in,' he ordered.

Each man in turn responded to say that they had suffered nothing more than a bad dose of horror in their encounter with the plague zombie pack - Closs, Ranpol, Dundas, Palno, Saul, Malone, Hacker, Irving.

But not Katsulas.

Guardsmen Katsulas was doubled up on the ferrocrete of the access road, Malone helping him reattach the rubberised mask of his rebreather to his helmet.

'Malone, what's Katsulas's condition?'

'First signs of chem-poisoning.' Trooper Malone reported. 'He's puked up his rations and the acid air has burnt the inside of his throat I think. There was blood in his vomit.'

One breath was all it took, on a pollution-ruined world like Fornax. The Adeptus Mechanicus really didn't care what environmental disaster was the consequence of the advance of their devotion to the Machine God. They wouldn't have got away with it on the windswept island-colonies of Cadia.

The smell of burning flesh and Katsulas's vomit penetrated Vessig's own rebreather and made him gag. Through sheer force of will and the need for battle-readiness in their predicament, he managed to keep his morning's rations down.

'Can he make it any further?' Vessig asked.

'I don't know much further he can go without proper medical aid,' Malone, the squad's hastily-prepped stand-in medic, reported. 'His airway could become obstructed even more by the phlegm his body will naturally produce to counter the effects of the poison.'

'I'm all right.' Katsulas wheezed and then broke into a coughing fit.

'No you're not, trooper.' Vessig corrected him. 'Don't talk. Save your breath for getting out of this hell-hole.'

Vessig scoped the road ahead of them. Thick black smoke rolled in from stinking chemical fires burning inside a gutted structure ahead and to the left, obscuring his view. He was now no longer certain where the enemy were within the maze of the buildings. They needed to secure another position from which they could reconnoitre the surrounding structures and alleyways. Ahead of them, past the corpses of the zombie

pack, fifty metres away the sheet metal walls of a manufactory shed rose above the surrounding ruins, apparently almost intact.

Reverting to hand signals, Vessig moved his men towards the structure, Hacker watching their backs as Malone and Palno between them practically carried Katsulas along the road, his arms slung over their shoulders. Dundas and Saul ducked behind the gargoyle-pillared columns at the open entrance to the shed, the door a buckled sheet of metal lying against a toppled Sentinel-lifter on the other side of the fer-rocrete roadway.

The industrial hangar enclosed an area of at least a square kilometre. The vast space was littered with the incompleated trackless hulls of tanks and armoured personnel carriers, although their armour plating had done little to protect them from the artillery bombardment the insurrectionists had subjected this area to.

Amazingly, most of the roof of the building was still intact. A large section was missing where a piece of masonry from another generarium had been thrown through the corrugated iron skin to land in the centre of the vast hangar, crushing a Consul-pattern tank chassis under its rockcrete mass.

'Ranpol and Dundas, stand guard by the door.' Vessig commanded. 'Irving and Hacker, I want you to check out the rest of this place. I don't want us being surprised by anyone coming in through the back.'

The troopers jogged off into the gloom, passed the shells of tanks and troop carriers. Meanwhile Malone had dragged the still coughing Katsulas into the shelter of a Trojan hauler and had opened up a medi-pack to see if he could do anything more for the choking trooper.

'Closs, Saul and Palno. Set up a defensive position here. If anything gets in I don't want them getting very far.'

Saul crossed himself again and then joined the other two Guardsmen in assessing the strategic potential of the barn.

They had come to Fornax in a vain attempt to hold back the advancing tide of Chaos as world after world fell before the horrific advance of the Despoiler's Black Crusade. And it was here that they would make their last stand against the cultist forces that had the manufactory world gripped in a stranglehold of death. It was here that they would die.

But the Guardsmen of Fortress Cadia would not give in to death so easily. It was not their way. Otherwise how had the name of Cadia ever

come to be a byword for dogged determination, martial prowess and courage? The shock troops of the Cadian Guard were a force to be feared.

'Sergeant Vessig, sir.' Dundas's voice came over the vox. 'We have contacts approaching.'

In an instant Vessig was with the door sentries.

'They're advancing from the west.' Trooper Ranpol explained. 'Some sort of interference is distorting my auspex readings but there's at least six of them, sir.'

'More of those zombies?'

'I don't think so, sir.'

'Sergeant, look!' Dundas hissed, and Vessig peered out from behind the shelter of the columned entrance.

The sickly fog, shot through with putrid yellow vapour, had spread thickly along the roadway, almost to the door of the manufactoiy shed. Then Vessig saw what the shaken trooper had seen.

Shadows loomed in the smoke and cloying chemical mist, the shapes of armoured giants over two and a half metres tall. Sergeant Vessig didn't need to give the order. His men didn't need to be told when to fire. Their training and experience told them all they needed to know.

Red pulses of laser light cut through the smoke and battle fog accompanied by a fizzing *zip*, as Vessig's own las-fire joined that of the two troopers posted on sentry duty. There was the sound of direct impacts but the shadows barely faltered. A gust of hot, ember-filled air rolled down the crater-pitted walkway, washing over the gas-masked Cadians, and parted the thick smoke before them.

And then the enemy were revealed.

A wave of nausea washed through Vessig and he staggered to a halt, feeling his knees give. An indescribable stench had permeated even the mask of his rebreather unit. It was like soured milk, rotten meat, diarrhoea and the acid sweetness of partially digested stomach contents. It drove the smell of cordite and ozone from his nostrils until the only thing he could smell made him visualise images of the dead and the dying left to rot where they fell on the battlefield.

Vessig swallowed hard and tried not to breathe in through his nose. He endeavoured to inhale through clenched teeth instead.

Over the vox he heard one of the troopers throw up into his helmet. That was another of his squad effectively incapacitated.

His own head span, his senses whirling with sickening dizziness, and his eyes began to water. But there was something else, something more than just the appalling, stomach-turning stench that was making him feel like this. It was an aura of intense, corrupting evil that accompanied the nausea-inducing miasma. Sergeant Vessig had never felt anything like it, but he knew it could only be one thing. This was what the touch of Chaos felt like. This was how it felt, how it smelt, how it tasted even, and every fibre of his body was repulsed by it.

Practically paralysed by the creeping miasma of rottenness, Vessig looked up into the cold visored eyes of the monstrosities emerging from the sucking mist.

The shifting murk revealed three grotesque figures clad in rusted, filth-streaked power armour of archaic design. Three more, still wreathed in the cloying filmy mist, came behind them.

Sergeant Vessig had only encountered the brothers of the Adeptus Astartes on two occasions in his long and varied career, the first time the White Consuls on the ice moon of Endathu and the second occasion during the Valerian Purges. Then he had seen warriors of the Howling Griffons Chapter in action, and impressive they had been too.

These abominations might once have been brethren to those other Space Marines, Vessig supposed. Now they were nothing but an affront to the God-Emperor and everything the great Imperium of Mankind stood for. These were the sons of Mortarion, the daemon-primarch of disease. The Death Guard.

The first abomination's armour was ruptured and cracked. Pipes dripping stinking bile protruded from these rents only to feed back into the bloated stomach armour of the Death Guard elsewhere. Three more pipes, not unlike those of a rebreather gas hood, connected the Marine's faceplate to a sphincter-like hole in the front of the distended chest plate. The auto reactive shoulder plates of the ancient armour bore the blasphemous iconography of the Plague Lord.

At first Vessig thought that the second Plague Marine had a spike on the crown of its helmet. Then seeing the corroded, ruptured ceramite at the base of the bony, grooved spike, the sergeant realised that it was in fact a horn protruding from the warped Marine's skull and subsequently through the top of its helm. As it took another step forward he saw that the toecaps

of the traitor's ceramite boots had split, making it appear as though its feet were cloven hooves.

But it was the third of the repulsive figures that was the most revolting of all. The traitor was helmetless, its face a mess of buboes and suppurating blisters.

Organic-looking pipes, glistening with mucus, burrowed their way into deformed nostrils and the corner of the Marine's gaping mouth. Its exposed teeth were cracked and yellow, its gums raw and bleeding. It was almost as if the polluted atmosphere of the forge world was not polluted enough for the Death Guard to thrive in, and they needed to ingest their own foul distillations and necrotic gases to function fully.

Even the debased bolters and war knives carried by the Death Guard were oxidised and dripping with disgusting toxins.

The legends said that these daemons of death had once been counted among the finest of the God-Emperor's crusading Space Marines, although to look at these living embodiments of plague and pestilence such an idea seemed madness to Vessig. But one thousand lifetimes ago they had broken their oaths and betrayed Him on Earth, turning on the very empire they had helped to build, now only desiring to tear down its towering walls and mighty bastions.

The world that had made the Death Guard warriors of the Emperor was long gone. Now, the possessed daemon-world that had become their festering home, and from which they had come to join the Despoiler's perversion of a holy war, was said to be a planet formed in the very likeness of the Plague God's own decayed dimension: a bubbling cesspit, boiling with malignant disease, the birthplace of viruses and terrible plagues.

To Vessig it seemed that these Traitor Marines could only have been vomited forth from the very deepest midden of hell itself, so vile and polluted was every fibre of their being. That anything so sick and corrupted could still be alive was beyond reason.

The sergeant's feeling of nausea only increased as the plague-creatures advanced. He tried to aim his lasgun, blinking away the salty tears streaming from his eyes. He felt his stomach turn over again and tightened his grip on the trigger as a clenching spasm wracked his body.

He had been aiming for the third traitor's head. Instead his las-bolt entered a hole in its armour, through which Vessig was horrified to see

pulsating purple-grey intestines. The las-bolt sizzled wetly and the Death Guard continued its inexorable advance.

Horribly almost as terrible as the appearance of these servants of the Plague Lord and the air of sickness they carried with them, the Cadians' attacks seemed to be having no effect.

The first of the Death Guard raised its rusted bolt-gun and fired. A burst of corroded shells tore through the air in a roar of gunfire and Ranpol, who was standing right next to Vessig, exploded, splattering the sergeant with steaming blood and gobbets of sizzling flesh.

'Back!' Vessig gasped. 'Back into the barn!'

Vessig and Dundas staggered back into the hangar. The sergeant could hear Dundas coughing wetly through the vomit clogging his rebreather.

The two men threw themselves behind a lifting gantry as the Death Guard burst into the barn at a clumping run. Hearing the commotion at the door the other Guardsmen reacted instantaneously. The whizzing *crack* of las-fire joined the chugging cough of bolter shells tearing through the air and the spang noise of those shells impacting against the hulls of wrecked tank chassises.

The interior of die manufactory lit up with the strobing of weapons-fire.

Vessig felt a stinging burn on the skin of his upper left arm as a piece of hot shrapnel tore open his combat fatigues and the bicep beneath. He staggered back from his position beside a crane gantry at the shock of the impact. Irving, firing from the same sheltered position, turned to see what had happened. Vessig watched in horror as Irving's head exploded like a shot melon, as a bolter shell punctured the toughened material of the Guardsman's helmet.

It was hopeless. Even an old soldier like Sergeant Vessig had to admit that they were overwhelmed. But no matter, he thought. Such a desperate fact was of little consequence to a veteran of Fortress Cadia. It would just mean that they would die for the noblest cause in the universe: that of serving the God-Emperor of Mankind.

'The Emperor protects.' Vessig voiced into his helm-vox.

'The Emperor protects,' those among Squad Vessig still standing replied.

'Continue to fire at will.'

There was a screaming roar of discharging heavy weapons and the flakboard wall of the manufactory disintegrated, exploding inwards as

heavily armoured giants burst through it. The hangar was lit up again by the strobing light of heavy las-fire and a bolter fusillade that threw up clouds of smoke and dust from the compacted floor of the shed.

The clouds parted in eddying swirls and for the second time that fateful day, Sergeant Vessig of the Cadian 108th Wyverns was confronted by towering colossi emerging from the black smoke, terrible golems of ceramite and steel.

Their armour was black and bore the unmistakable wings of the two-headed Imperial eagle. Other strange glyphs decorated their shoulder plates but what marked these warriors out more than anything else, especially compared to the Plague Marines, were their robotic limbs and obvious augmetics. They seemed to be half-cybernetic creations, bursting from the roiling smoke and flame like avenging angels.

Vessig's mind was in turmoil. He half-hoped that these new arrivals were their liberators, but were he and the survivors of his squad really safe from their wrathful deliverers? The sergeant scrambled backwards making sure that he kept fully out of the way of the Cadians' advancing, black-armoured, unwitting saviours.

The loyalist Marines doused their traitor brethren with bolter fire, searing beams of las-fire and screaming plasma discharge. Vessig watched with grim satisfaction as the corpulent armour of one of the Plague Marines disintegrated under the concussive blast of an autocannon. Stinking offal and viscera slopped from the rent armour only to be cooked by the blast from a plasma gun.

Where the black-armoured Marines' weapons found their mark amongst the Death Guard, thick green gunk spurted from the traitors' wounds.

A huge, highly augmented Marine's calliper arm took the head off one of the corrupted abominations with a sharp twist. Viscous black blood welled up from the jaundiced flesh of the stump of the thing's neck as its bloated body keeled over onto the floor of the hangar.

As the leader turned his gleaming bolter on another of the diseased ones, a voice, hot with rage boomed from the vox-speakers of the warrior's helmet. Vessig noticed that the Space Marine's visor was adapted so that one eye was an vertical oblong red lens.

'Irons Hands!' the authoritative voice declared. 'Purge the vile plague-bearers from this place, for the Emperor, in the name of our Primarch

Ferrus Manus! Iron Hands, purge the weak! Burn the heretic! Destroy the corrupted!

FOUR

HUNTING THULE

FERROTURITUS PRIME GUARD COMMAND HQ

'WHO IS IN charge here? I want to see him *now!*' Iron-Father Gdolkin demanded, his voice resonant with barely-contained anger.

Standing at the top of the stone steps leading down into the command chamber of the bunker complex, Gdolkin scanned the anxious faces of its startled occupants.

The ferrocrete structure that formed the headquarters of Imperial operations was plain and functional compared to the grand design given to the noble veneration of the primarch in the Vurgaan clan's land-leviathan monastery-fortress, and lacked the extravagant gothic detailing of the cathedrals of the machine temples of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

It was all brass-framed cogitator banks, walls of oscilloscope augury displays and at the apex of an amphitheatre section of tiered plasteel benches he could see the concave bowl of a holosphere projector. Currently the image displayed in three-dimensions within its static flickering light-sphere was that of some monstrous Chaos-engine trundling across the oily estuary spilling from a promethium processing plant. The engine, which looked like a great, wheeled war tower, appeared to be covered with some sort of rough tarpaulin or animal hide. Slime dripped from holes in the skin of the tower, leaving a trail of tar-like excretion in the deep grooves left by its wheels.

From this spot the Imperial tacticians and Guard commanders could oversee the Imperial defence of half a dozen districts in the industrial cityscapes of Ferroturitus Prime. The one obvious ornamentation in the command bunker was a huge double-headed eagle, its monstrous, steel-bladed wings outstretched above a widescreen pict-display.

The bunker was alive with the bustle of officers from various rungs of the command ladder, tech-priests, loyalist PDF officers and

Administratum scribes. And yet despite all their obvious business, to the Iron-Father's eye, none of them seemed to be achieving very much.

Too many scribes blot the scroll, he thought.

Gdolkon thundered down the steps from the adamantium bulkhead entrance to the bunker, twelve Iron Hands following in his wake, their armour still scorched and scarred, fresh from their battle against the traitor Death Guard in the manufactory. Behind the Space Marines, a huddle of exhausted Guardsmen dressed in the urban camo fatigues of the Cadian 108th shuffled into the command centre.

The Iron Hands' original objective, on Fornax Orbis Majoris, had been to rendezvous with Magos Omega Thule of the Adeptus Mechanicus. But as their Thunderhawk, the *Iron Eagle*, had roared in low under the roiling smog swathing the manufactory rains, they had detected the presence of pockets of the Plague God's own putrescent warrior elite.

The sheer existence of such foul abominations, the embodiment of what happened when man gave into the ultimate weakness, made the Space Marines' blood boil. They were a stain on the face of the Imperium, an abhorrence in the eyes of the Emperor and his most unforgiving loyal primarch sons. The Iron Hands could not allow such blasphemies in the sight of the Emperor to continue to exist, and so had bailed out of their craft into the ruinous wasteland where they had then confronted their enemies in a merciless trial by combat.

The fact that in their purging of the unclean Death Guard they had saved the Cadians from otherwise certain death was irrelevant. To the minds of the Iron Hands, if Sergeant Vessig's troopers had died, it would have only been as a result of their own physical, mental or spiritual weakness.

The Cadians were only here now because they had followed in the wake of the Space Marines, keeping to the path the vengeful Iron Hands had cleared through the scavenging zombie packs infesting the rains, as they had left their Thunderhawk to rendezvous with them back at Ferroturitus Prime Guard Command HQ.

Some of those present in the bunker in a more subservient role were now cautiously coming to the aid of the Cadians, as if uncertain as to whether their help would be considered a dereliction of duty, or that they feared tempting the Space Marines' wrathful retribution if they acted in a way that the Iron Hands might consider to be interference.

'Emperor's throne!' Gdolkin exclaimed. He was a battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes! He did not expect to be treated in such a disrespectful way by these fools.

Somewhere a distant warning klaxon was blaring.

The Iron-Father marched across the command chamber, a vision of barely-contained fury ready to explode like an electrical storm. The hulking giants of his brother Iron Hands followed. Everyone moved out of the way of the monstrous, black-armoured warriors, the harsh glare of cracked glow-globes flashing from the clan company markings and the taloned gauntlets of their Chapter symbols. Each of the Astartes was at least a whole head taller than the tallest of the other men and cyborg-priests present there.

The Space Marines held their boltguns across their chests as they would if they were on parade, or going into battle. Just one of those boltguns was a terrifying piece of destructive equipment, so large that an ordinary man could barely lift one. The ammunition they fired made them more like small rapid-firing rocket launchers when compared to standard Guard issue firearms.

On hearing the commotion a hunched, hooded, red-robed figure unfolded himself, with a distinct ping of metallic joints, and turned myopic telescope-lensed eyes on the advancing Iron Hands.

The Space Marines stopped in front of the central cogitator's data-input and information retrieval console as the tech-priest elbowed his way through. The retreating adepts and administrators backed away before the Iron Hands, and left the warriors standing at the centre of a clearing amongst the forest of bustling adepts, although their arrival had temporarily brought the pandemonium to a standstill.

'What is the meaning of this intrusion?' the tech-priest demanded indignantly, and rather unwisely, considering who he was speaking to and Gdolkin's current attitude of anger.

The Iron Hands and the Machine Cult had ten thousand years of mutual respect built up between them. The same was not true between Iron-Father Gdolkin and this arrogant technophile.

'Are you in charge here?'

'And who might you be to speak in such a way to a favoured servant of the almighty Ommissiah?'

Securing his bolt pistol within a locking clamp that formed part of the bionics of his left leg, Gdolkin took hold of his adapted helmet with both silvered hands and gave it a twist. There was the hiss of released air, as the environment seal of the armoured suit disengaged. The Iron-Father lifted the helm from his heavily augmented head.

'I am Iron-Father Gdolkin,' he snarled, his voice much quieter now, audible only to the tech-priest and those closest to them, and as a result sounding more blood-chilling than his bullish bellows, 'child of Medusa, son of the great Primarch Ferrus Manus and devoted servant of the Omnissiah and the Emperor. Who are you?'

The tech-priest stared into the augmented face of the Iron-Father, his mouth agape in awe.

There was a moment in which no one moved, the silence broken only by the ticking of the cogitators and the hiss of static over the vox-comms.

Then the chief representative of the Machine Cult stepped forward, his knee-joints hissing underneath the thick, fire retardant fabric of his robes with exhalations of compressed gas.

'I am Magos Ludd of the Adeptus Mechanicus,' he stated coldly, resolutely unabashed. The tech-priest had an air of age and machine-oil about him. He had probably outlived many Imperial commanders in his overseeing of Fornax Orbis Majoris and would see many others into their graves before it was his turn to join with the machine soul of the Omnissiah.

Apart from the heraldic embroidery of his robe, the most obvious thing that marked Magos Ludd out as a representative of the Machine Cult was a chrome-plated lower jaw and a set of immaculate, steel teeth. The Omnissiah-only-knew what was hidden under the folds of scorched cloth.

'Where is Magos Thule?' the Iron-Father demanded.

'I am the senior Mechanicus representative here,' Ludd retorted, obviously unhappy with the Space Marine's aggressive attitude.

Gdolkin saw something squirm beneath the tech-priest's crimson robe. Mechadendrites no doubt, he thought.

'I said, where is Thule?' The Iron-Father's roar reverberated through the tense stillness of the bunker.

There was a metal cracking sound as the Iron-Father flexed and clenched his left hand, bunching the metal fingers into a fist. His imposing servo-arm mimicked the action. The magos's abrupt alteration of his

manner suggested that Gdolkin's expression of barely suppressed rage had done the trick.

'M-Magos Thule is not here.'

'Enough of this! Why are the acolytes of the Adeptus Mechanicus always so clandestine about everything? Do not answer by telling me what I can already see patently well for myself.' Gdolkin snapped, tapping a robust adamantium digit against his augmented right eyepieces. 'We have been ordered to come to this Emperor-forsaken world by the great clan council of our holy Chapter, abandoning our sacred homeworld of Medusa to the predations of the Chaos hordes spilling out of the Eye of Terror that are even now throwing this sector and a dozen others into turmoil, solely to rendezvous with one Techno-Magos Omega Thule. Are you telling me that having ran the gauntlet of the Chaos fleet orbiting above this heretic-infested world, and having fought the minions of the foul Plague Lord, only to be told that the one we seek is not even here?'

The Iron-Father's bellow cut through all who heard it like a chainsword.

The magos hesitated for a moment and then said, 'Magos Thule came to us a matter of weeks ago from the Hekla system. To my knowledge he is still on this planet, though I don't know where.'

'The Hekla system?'

'You know it?'

'I have come across its name before.'

Gdolkin's mimetic memory implants actually remembered precisely where he had come across the name of Hekla - it had been in a twenty-three collected volume work concerning the myths of those Adeptus Astartes Chapters whose domains bordered the Ocularis Terribus, and in particular legends surrounding the lost thirteenth company of the Space Wolves. As an Iron-Father of his Chapter it was his sacred duty to minister to the souls of his brother Marines just as he administered to the spirits of their wargear, and so he needed to be aware of the belief systems of other Astartes Chapters and be ever vigilant for the weakness of heresy, lest it lead to the total corruption of a soul.

'What was he doing there?'

Ludd laughed. The sound was hollow and tinny, and utterly humourless. 'You were the one who said that the devotees of our sacred Machine Cult are clandestine in their practices. Grand Magos Thule did not deign to tell me his business here, only that his work was vital in bringing an end to

this war against the Despoiler's hordes.' Magos Ludd made the sign of the Blessed Machine at his own mention of the Chaos lord's name, 'and that it was this same work which brought him to Fornax. That it was for the benefit of all and could bring us salvation from the servants of the Fell Powers.'

'You have spoken to him then.'

'Yes,' Ludd confirmed. 'Briefly.'

'So what is his reason for being on this world? Am I to take it that it is not primarily to help defend Fornax Orbis Majoris from the Chaos invasion taking place here?'

'Not primarily, no.'

'Then why?' Gdolkina was becoming frustrated by Magos Ludd's reluctance to reveal details to him. 'Tell me.'

'He did not spend long here at Ferroturitus Prime command.' Ludd elucidated. His tone suggested to Gdolkina that either he held a contemptuous opinion of his fellow magos, or the Iron Hands and their brutal leader, or both. 'Once he discovered that the enemy were focusing their attentions on the Argentum Mountains he left with his own personal entourage of adepts, tech-guard and servitors. And a mismatched lot they were too. Of course the situation here has not improved since.'

'So what *is* the situation here exactly?' Gdolkina asked sourly.

'Here, let me show you.' Ludd said, leading the way across the command vault with tapping footsteps ringing on the rockcrete, taking the Iron Hands to the holo-projection sphere.

'Our surveyors and calculus logi have been assessing and matriculating the information culled from a variety of sources: the Imperial fleet in orbit, ground scanning devices, as well as drone-probes and augur satellites in geo-stationary orbit.'

'So, what are you trying to tell me?'

'The heretic forces appear to be committing an inordinately large percentage of their manpower to a target in the Argentum range to the west of the continent, beyond the promethium refineries of District 37.' Magos Ludd explained, his voice never wavering from its tone of irascible condescension.

'What is in those mountains, I wonder?' Gdolkina murmured, peering at the green-washed holosphere projection. The Iron-Father's servo-callipers seemed to lean over his shoulder as if to have a look too.

The spiking peaks of the three-dimensional map projection were dotted with tiny icon markers like a chemical rash.

'And these denote the heretic forces?'

'Correct.' Ludd pronounced, sounding bored rather than impressed.

'God-Emperor, how many of them are there?' another of the Iron Hands voiced. Brother Yergen had not long been fully initiated into the Chapter before the Despoiler's armies poured forth from the malevolently pulsating Ocularis Terribus and Gdolkin had selected him to join his special missions force. His gleaming relatively new artificial left hand was virtually unscathed and was, so far, the only part of him that had been replaced by bionics. This was his first real experience of war beyond the training simulations run by the Vurgaan clan company as part of his preparation for being granted full initiate status, and before that the inter-clan skirmishes of the native Medusan tribes.

'Our calculus logi estimate that there are twenty-two thousand eight hundred and sixty-one heretics centred upon the target.' Ludd said, his tone clipped and mechanical.

'Really.' Gdolkin muttered, sounding equally unimpressed. 'So what is Magos Thule's appeal with the target?'

'It would appear that he is as interested in the Argentum Mountains as the enemy are.' Ludd said. 'But do not ask me why; I do not know.'

'Where is Thule at this present time?' Gdolkin pressed, scanning the flickering holosphere projection with genetically modified eyes as well as augmented ocular replacements.

'Aboard the *Gehenna*, I believe.'

'The *Gehenna*?'

'Let me see if I can find it for you.' Gdolkin felt that the only reason he was being more amenable with regards to using the holosphere was because the tech-adept enjoyed interacting with the device.

Magos Ludd extended a hand towards the brass-rimmed bowl of the projector unit. As he did so the fingernail of his index finger flicked back and a thin cable extended from inside the finger bone itself, inserting a connector pin into a socket on the control panel.

The image within the sphere blurred and twisted until it gave way to waves of meaningless interference. Then the static resolved itself again.

'What is that?' Brother Ibrus exclaimed.

They all looked. Revealed before their eyes was a monstrous cannon mounted on a carriage formed from three traction units. The weapon seemed huge against the backdrop of the jagged Argentum peaks until Gdolkin realised that the specks crawling around the base of the tracked units and over the holed hull itself were in fact human-sized figures - Death Guard, Imperial soldiers, traitor PDF troopers and the tech-guard of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Then the weapon appeared gargantuan beyond all reason. It was certainly bigger than any Mechanicus creation he had even seen, other than the starships of his Chapter. The monstrous gun was on a par with the land-behemoth fortress-monasteries of the Iron Hands themselves back on Medusa.

'That,' said Ludd, with undisguised smugness, 'is Ordinatus *Gehenna*!

'It looks like one of the land-leviathans of our noble clan companies,' said another of the Iron Hands, Brother Sefalus, his augmented vox-box tones sounding like the grating of a rusted chainsword.

'What is it doing in that region?'

Magos Ludd sighed loudly, clearly irritated by the Iron-Father's persistent questioning. He still answered him, however, if only in the hope that the endless questions would be exhausted and he could be rid of the Space Marine.

'Ordinatus *Gehenna* was dispatched with the purpose of eliminating the plague horde's focus in the Argentum Mountains.'

'Why? What is there?'

'Nothing more than ore mines.'

'Or at least that was what was thought to be there, before the uprising occurred.'

'What are you saying?' Ludd asked defensively.

'Did you not consider the possibility that it was something unearthed during the mining process that attracted the attentions of the enemy, at the expense of seemingly more valuable strategic sites across this continent?'

'Such a hypothesis had been proposed.' Ludd admittedly, almost reluctantly.

It was the nature of the Adeptus Mechanicus to be secretive, protecting their mystical knowledge, as they had done for so many millennia, and Magos Ludd found it hard to overcome the ingrained attitude of his long lifetime.

'Hence the presence of Ordinatus *Gehenna* and its accompanying tech-guard army, no doubt.'

'Indeed. We had no idea what we were dealing with, but we couldn't take any more risks. The ancient ordinatus engines are priceless relics dating back as far as the Dark Age of Technology.' Ludd said reverentially, his tone and attitude changing from aggravated annoyance to one of holy veneration, crossing himself with the holy sign of the Machina Opus. 'They deserve the utmost protection, so that they might continue to aid us in our constant battles to hold back the enveloping darkness. Their machine spirits are among some of the oldest and mightiest in the entire Imperium, as old as the war-machines of the Legiones Titanicus. The only things older are the battleships of the Imperial Navy.'

A wave of green static snow washed through the image of the leviathan landship. The image flickered again and then cut out. The holosphere was now projecting nothing but a snowstorm of interference, accompanied by a soft resonating hum.

'We've lost the surveyor-satellite,' an adept informed Ludd.

Concern contorted the tech-priest's features.

'Then this is to be Ordinatus *Gehenna's* greatest hour and probably its last stand too.' Ludd said, his voice heavy with woe, as if the weight of a Titan god-engine rested on his shoulders.

'Do you have no other reinforcements that can be deployed to safeguard the precious ordinatus leviathan?' Gdolk asked, as if he was addressing a student in a schola progenium.

'There is nothing within fifty kilometres of the *Gehenna's* position that could help. The Legio Mortis Metallum is engaged fighting the enemy at the gates of manufactory hive Godspire Secundus, holding back the tanks of the rebel armoured units, and the Tradaran Rifles are involved in a firefight with the militia guerrilla armies of Spire Prime. There is nothing else.'

For a moment silence hung in the air between the irate commander of the Iron Hands and the resentful tech-priest. A snowstorm of static continued to wash through the emerald orb of the holosphere projection.

'Then it would appear that there is only one course of action open to us,' Gdolk said, his tone calmer than before but still heavy with the inevitability of the situation.

'And what would that be, Iron-Father?' Brother-Initiate Fundare asked.

'We are wasting our time here. We go to the heart of this battle for the planet. We must go to the Argentum Mountains and locate *Ordinatus Gehenna*. We shall quash the armies of the insurrectionists and find our errant Mechanicus magos. We will then hunt down Omega Thule. The *Iron Eagle* leaves within the hour.'

Gdolkin turned on his heel and made to exit the bunker, leaving the other occupants of the command bunker as stunned and surprised as they had been by the Space Marines' angry arrival, and at what had happened in the matter of minutes since.

The rest of the Iron Hands followed in the Iron-Father's wake as he cut his way through the startled onlookers.

'It would appear that we are to be Magos Thule's salvation,' said Gdolkin.

FIVE

MORBUS EX MACHINA

THE FOOTHILLS OF THE ARGENTUM MOUNTAINS

THE IRON EAGLE soared over the tattered, fractured landscape, scuds of ochre cloud passing beneath the Thunderhawk like a shoal of sand rays in the southern oceans of Medusa, the homeworld the Iron Hands had been forced to leave behind.

Gdolkin felt his anger still as hot within him as when the elders of the great clan council had told him his place in this unholy war was not fighting to keep the enemy from the threshold of his precious mother-world but on some distant planet where many of the weak-willed populace had already succumbed to the honeyed lies of Chaos. He would never be found lacking in such a pitiful way. As far as Iron-Father Gdolkin was concerned, there was only one fate much of the population of Fornax Orbis Majoris deserved and he would happily administer it himself with his thrice-blessed bolt pistol, if Ferrus Manus answered his prayers; but only after he had vented his wrath on the vile traitors who had once dared consider themselves kin to the loyal Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes.

'ETA to target position t-minus three minutes,' the pilot's monotone voice reverberated over Gdolkin's helmet vox.

The Iron-Father cast his eyes around the dimly lit interior of the Thunderhawk. The ruddy glow of the hazard illuminators made it seem as though all the occupants were shrouded in a pall the colour of dried blood. He took in each of the Iron Hands in turn.

He had fought with all of them before apart from Brother Yergen, but the recently inducted Space Marine had made such an impression on his tutors for the dedication he had shown towards the Vurgaan clan and the Chapter as a whole that Gdolkin had marked him from the outset to join his hand picked force. Yergen had already survived his baptism of fire, purging the ruinous Death Guard from the tank manufactory. The battles to

come would grant the young battle-brother much valuable experience, as long as he remained strong.

Gdolkin had fought with all the rest before, against the alien, the mutant and the heretic. He was surrounded by the battle-brothers of Librarian Melchor's retinue as well as the tactical squads of Sergeants Vincien and Erastus.

Brother-Librarian Melchor sat with his head bowed, as if in a state of prayer. There barely seemed room in the restraining straps of the steel seat for the huge man's Terminator armour. The bionics of his face glinted in the ruddy cabin light. Silver tracery picked out the sigils that warded against possession by warp entities, the crimson light making it look like the holy runes were written in fresh blood.

Fluttering on wings made of swan feathers and steel pinions was a grotesque psyber-cherub, scroll scraps wrapping its body, illuminated with prayer passages from the *Liber Psykana*, to help mould it to its purpose of boosting Melchor's already formidable psychic powers. The malformed child-thing imitated the attitude of its master, its eyes closed as if in sleep, its chin resting on its hairless chest and its monkey hands pressed together as if in supplication to the primarch and the Emperor, as the Thunderhawk bucked and rocked through the thermal currents of the planet's atmosphere.

The Librarian was truly an example to the other Iron Hands: an iron will encased inside an iron body.

Brother Reuban sat next to him, another of the warriors forming Melchor's command and directly responsible for the Librarian's protection. The ruddy light of the hazard glow-globes glittered back from the lenses of his two augmetic eyes, making them appear to be fashioned from ruby quartz. Reuban's eyesight was as sharp as any other's within the clan company and he wore his optical augmetics with as much pride as he wore his ritual battle scars. The bionic eyes were battle-honours that had been earned fighting the greenskin aliens on the desert plains of Na'jadar. An ork truck had tried to take the autocannon emplacement he was holding in a head-on collision. Reuban's sharp-sighted firing, even then, had ruptured the crude vehicle's fuel tank, the resulting explosion of promethium burning out his eyes. He had continued to man the gun emplacement, killing another two dozen orks and gretchin, whilst blind, before an attack bike squadron had liberated the position.

The Iron Hands' banner-bearer Dothan Kansbar, Apothecary Caduceus, who had helped Gdolkin perform many surgical procedures upon himself, Iron-Brother Ibrus and Initiate Gobard made up the rest of the command squad.

The Iron Hands would go into battle with two command units leading them: that of Librarian Melchor and Iron-Father Gdolkin himself. Such a deployment was not uncommon within their Chapter - just as the Chapter as a whole was governed by a council rather than one Chapter Master - and had been decided upon thousands of years ago. It harked back to the dark days of the Great Heresy itself, when it had been proved that absolute power held by one man, Space Marine or no, could corrupt absolutely and appallingly. Naturally, Iron-Father Gdolkin would be in overall command, unless he showed some sign of weakness, at which juncture he would be relieved of command instantly.

Gdolkin considered the two tactical squads under his command for this mission. He railed at the thought of this being a mercy mission; there was no place for mercy in war. Veteran-Sergeant Erastus had fought at the Iron-Father's side longer than any of those present within the expeditionary force. Miel Erastus and Anatos Gdolkin had fought side by side at the Diocletian Gate on the warp-threatened hive-world of Manastus VII, as the heretic forces had tried to storm the last operational spaceport there. It had been during that four-day long battle that Erastus had lost his left hand for a second time.

In Erastus's squad were Battle-Brothers Oved, Fundare, Taudis, Naltech and Zorian.

On the opposite side of the Thunderhawk's passenger hold sat Squad Vincien. Sergeant Vincien was a veteran of the Grailsword Campaign, fought by the Iron Hands and their successor Chapters the Red Talons and the Brazen Claws, one hundred and eleven standard Imperial years previously. Amongst his squad there was Brother Sefalus. He had fought with Gdolkin on Sparme against the sheed infestation there. It was Brother Sefalus who would act as the newly initiated Yergen's mentor on the battlefield.

The rest of the second tactical squad were Brothers Momech, Shion, Betorin and Naskin.

Mighty warriors all. Noble warriors. Iron Hands.

Then there were the battle-servitors. In the Iron-Father's personal slave-machine bodyguard at present, following the Inohver Incident, were combat cyber-drones Gibeon XII, Joab XIII, Gikal 674 and Ishmael 192.

The servitors swung from restraining clamps attached to their heads as the Thunderhawk bucked and yawed to avoid flashes of anti-aircraft fire. They rattled around in the back of the main hold on the tracked runs of their deployment assembly, connected to nutrient feeds, oil-pressure regulators and tactician cogitator download units, feeding their unprogrammed minds with the information they would need to fulfil their function protecting the Iron-Father as he fought to purge the forge world of its invaders.

Gdolkon turned his head to survey the battlefield passing beneath them through an armacryst porthole and considered the enemy they were about to face.

The thick black smoke rolling into the skies from the burning promethium refineries - kilometres of petrochemical production plants all washed with flames - obscured the view through the porthole momentarily. Then the black blankets of cloud parted.

The ordinatus engine rose up before them, a colossal construction of Mechanicus might, all monstrous tracked traction units, defence cannons, augur arrays and command spires.

The ancient war machine was dominated by an enormous barrel, larger even than one of the giant warrior-gods of the Titan Legions, that rose from the centre of the largest of three traction units. It was a leviathan creation of a gun dating from even before the birth of the glorious Imperium. Surrounding the monstrous cannon were all manner of archeotech devices, such as building-wide tesla coils to help focus and maintain the devastating, mountain levelling beam the gargantuan gun produced.

The mouth of the barrel opened like the top of a volcanic crater. At least half of the city-sized war machine was made up of the generarium units needed to produce the incredible amount of power needed to fire the apocalypse cannon.

But now the ancient war machine was a shadow of its former glorious self. The *Gehenna* had suffered a relentless barrage from the enemy's guns, determined not to let the ordinatus complete its mission. The vanes of its augur arrays had been holed, command spires toppled and its gun

emplacements were now nothing more than smoking pits in its side. Its front track unit had been twisted and fused by the detonation of some enormous mass-reactive warhead; indeed the unit teetered on the edge of a deep scorched crater. The ancient engine's hull had been breached in several places, all across its structure, and figures swarmed all over the *ordinatus* like flies.

A putrescent horde of enemy troops covered the grey-black plain before the *ordinatus*-engine like a rash.

Gdolkin could see larger, blockier shapes moving amongst the horde, which looked like shiny emerald green beetles. They crossed the battlefield at a slow, steady pace, crushing any who opposed them beneath iron claws, inexorably ploughing their way through the leviathan-machine's defensive cordons, tramping razor-wire coils under their feet without a thought. They broke through into Imperial-held trenches dug in around the mighty *Gehenna*, spewing high-velocity death at the loyalists from corrupted, venom-dripping cannons.

As they flew lower Gdolkin's enhanced and augmented eyesight was able to pick out the symbol of the Plague God blistered onto the carapace of one of the Chaos dreadnoughts. The triangular darts of targeting icons homed in on the blasphemous insignia, magnifying lenses in his optical implant whirring and clicking as they did so.

As he watched, the blisters blinked open to reveal grotesque, circling eyeballs underneath. The glistening eyes stopped spinning, and locked on to the passing flyer. Gdolkin could almost believe that they were looking directly at him, as the Death Guard dreadnought continued on its unhindered advance, unaware of what its blister-eyes were seeing.

'Drop zone in thirty seconds,' the pilot's steel tone announced.

Each of the Iron Hands made one final check of his weapon.

Gdolkin repeated the Prayer of Right Firing to ward against breech jams for the fifteenth time since the *Iron Eagle* had departed Ferroturitus Prime command, and asked for the primarch's blessing. Wherever lost Manus might be, Gdolkin knew that he was with the Sons of Medusa in spirit and watching lest they show any sign of weakness, and so bring down his unforgiving judgement upon their heads should they bring the noble name of the Iron Hands into disrepute.

A clattering whine started up as the exit ramp of the Thunderhawk began to descend and the servitor release system began to deploy.

'Drop zone in fifteen seconds.'

'This is it, men,' Gdolkon broadcast to his company on their comm-net, his words drowning out the scream of attitude thrusters in their helmets. 'Think of the primarch, and his strength shall be yours.'

'Ten—'

'Think of the Omnissiah, and your bodies of steel shall never fail you.'

'Seven—'

'Think of the Emperor, and his blessing will be upon you.'

'Four—'

The Iron Hands released their restraints ready to leap out of the Thunderhawk the instant it touched down.

Before they entered the battle for the ordinatus, their Iron-Father had one last battle-cant to inspire them.

'Warriors of iron, onward and upward!'

THE BLACK HULL of the Thunderhawk rose into the air, kicking up great clouds of dust and ash, spitting auto-cannon rounds into the closest ranks of traitor Guardsmen, providing the disembarked Iron Hands with covering fire as they secured the drop zone.

There was an explosion in the air that shook the ruins on the ground and threw some of the Space Marines to the ground. It would be madness for the *Iron Eagle* to risk its own survival to ensure the safety of the troops on the ground. With a scream of jet engines the Thunderhawk rocketed away from the imperilled ordinatus.

Weapons-fire snickered out of the smoke and swirling dust, beams of dazzling light streaking out of the gloom and darkness beneath the broiling black clouds of the promethium fires, a vile smog so thick that it turned day to night.

With a terrible roar, autocannon shells began to eat up the ground between the Iron Hands and the enemy. Huge shapes sporting auto-loader hoppers and whirling chain-blades the size of dozer blades clumped towards the Space Marines out of the blackness, supported by armoured warriors as large and imposing as the Iron Hands. The drop zone had already been compromised.

To the Iron Hands' right, and apparently leading towards the overrun ordinatus, was a series of rat-runs that must once have formed part of the

mine workings here in the ore-rich foothills of the Argentum mountain range.

The Iron-Father clambered into the trench. Behind him, his servitor bodyguard did the same. Squad Erastus also dropped into the trench, even as Brother Zorian's shoulder was clipped by a spinning piece of shrapnel, which gouged a chunk from the Vurgaan lightning-strike symbol proudly displayed there.

Gdolkin saw Librarian Melchor's squad make for the dark zigzagging scar of another trench on the southern side of the no-man's-land, Apothecary Caduceus's armour shone incongruously white amidst the black carapaces of the other Iron Hands, through his silvered left hand still marked him out as one of them. They were given covering fire by Squad Vincien.

The Ordinatus *Gehenna* lay to the west of their current position. Gdolkin had briefed his men thoroughly beforehand: their mission was to secure the ordinatus weapon from the enemy with the ultimate intention of finding the errant Magos Thule.

The Iron Hands moved off. Their armoured boots splashed through a muddy soup of polluted water, spilled blood and chemical discharge. The corrugated sheet shored trench was already choked with the bodies of the dead. Corpses in Imperial Guard uniforms lay in messy, broken heaps and here and there could be seen the sigil-cut bodies of heretic turncoat soldiers. The watery gut of the trench was awash with unidentifiable body parts.

There was a shrill whistling, the *crump* of an impact and then a cascade of foetid earth and rock was thrown into the air above the ridge of the trench, as part of the trench wall collapsed. Brothers Taudis and Naltech extricated themselves from premature burial and then the Iron Hands were on their way again, their painstakingly maintained power armour lending speed and strength to their jogging strides.

Then the enemy were upon them, and Gdolkin knew them by the abysmal stench they exuded, if nothing else.

The heretics dropped on the Space Marines in a tide of pestilential martyrdom. They cared not that they died almost instantly at the gauntlets of the Iron Hands, their minds twisted by the foul contagions they had gladly welcomed into their bodies - the gifts of a benevolent, pestilential deity. They cared only that they played their part to hinder those they saw

to be servants of a false emperor and allow their masters to fulfil their corrupted plans.

The Iron Hands cut through the diseased bodies of traitor Guardsmen, robed cultists and deformed mutants, spraying the trench with a lethal concoction of grey brain matter, blood and bacteria-bloated viscera.

They were the lost and the damned now, but they cared not. They lived - if it could be called that, considering the suffering their bodies had willingly undergone - only to die for Father Nurgle. And they had served the purpose other malign intelligences had determined for them. As Gdolkin cut down a pincer-armed ape creature, he saw the three-eyed visor of one of Nurgle's own Death Guard appear through the green-grey mist at the same moment as the Plague Marine raised an acid-dripping blade above its head.

Gdolkin's power axe met the corrupted plague sword in mid-air with a crackle of discharging energy and a burst of sparks. A drop of the viscous venom splattered Gdolkin's armour. He was aware of a bubbling hiss as it ate a small crater through the paint into the bonded ceramite beneath.

The Iron-Father swung his axe free and, seizing the initiative, swung in low at the Plague Marine's legs. If the force blade connected with the rusted greaves it would slice through them like a laser through mercury.

Despite the Plague Marine's bloated appearance, suggesting that its movements might be slower than those of the tech-enhanced Iron Hand, the Nurglite brought its blade down to block Gdolkin's strike. The Iron-Father raised his boltgun in his left hand and, taking a step forward, rammed it into the topmost of the three eye-lenses, cracking the grimy, green tinted glass as he did so. He pulled the trigger. Several rounds of destructive shells blasted into the horned helm of the Plague Marine, exploding out of the back of it in a welter of cauterised brain matter and bone fragments. The corrupted creature's body spasmed briefly and then collapsed onto the ground, folding in on itself.

The Iron Hands engaged the Death Guard in a storm of bolter fire and brute strength. Hurling aside the last of their mutated attackers, they crashed into the Plague Marines' line as the thrice-cursed horrors continued to advance towards them from the other end of the trench.

The trench was wide enough at this point for four Marines to engage the enemy. Sergeant Erastus had forced his way up next to the Iron-Father, throwing devastating plasma fire into the packed squad of plague troops.

So here they were, fighting shoulder to shoulder again, with Gdolkin's gun-servitors laying down such a storm of suppressing fire from behind them that the corrupted Nurgle-creatures must have felt that their Daemon-Primarch Mortarion had abandoned them.

But the rest of the Death Guard continued to push from behind. The bloated bodies of those in front soaked up the bullets of the Iron Hands until their corrupted forms could take no more and they exploded in a mess of blood and cancerous tissue, rusted armour pulverised to ceramite dust. Then there was no more room to wield firearms effectively and the two sides joined in close-quarter combat.

A gaunt, shadowed face was suddenly before Gdolkin, one cheek eaten away by the voracious red of a suppurating abscess. The unclean warrior was completely hairless, scabbed sores on the dull grey flesh of its pate crusted with brown and green filth. The Iron-Father blocked a jab from a corroded plague knife with his power axe as he hastily locked his bolt pistol back inside the holster-space inside his left leg.

His left hand free again, he threw a servo-assisted punch into the Plague Marine's head. The bionic replacement connected with the warrior's face. There was an audible splintering sound as the front of the Traitor-Marine's head caved inwards in a spray of blood and stinking yellow pus. The Death Guardsman staggered back, putting his hands instinctively to his face. Gdolkin followed through with a swing at his opponent's body with his axe. The curved blade smashed through a ruptured fissure in the Plague Marine's distended gut, cooking the organs inside.

Gdolkin pulled the axe free again only to find ropey intestines knotted around the blade. Making pathetic, unsettling mewling sounds, the Nurgle worshipper began to advance again, rolling in the viscera connecting it to the Iron-Father.

There was the staccato roar of a heavy weapon letting rip and the Plague Marine faltered again as armour-piercing shells pounded its body. The servitor Gibeon XII put a fusillade of shells into the resilient plague-thing's body from its rattling belt-fed assault cannon arm, one of the rounds detonating inside the corpulent body, finishing the Nurgle worshipper dramatically.

Still more of the blasphemous Marines pressed in on the Iron Hands. Every one of the enemy was unique in some vile way. Some wore necklaces of rotting fingers and ears cut from the dying and the dead,

others had shrunken heads hanging from their belts. The metal and ceramite of their armour was pitted and scarred by corrosion. Injuries that would have felled other soldiers, even the superhuman warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, barely even caused the Plague Marines to falter in their relentless, zombie-like advance.

Fat flies buzzed over the heads of the Death Guard, drooping pallid white abdomens pregnant with virulent infections. Gdolkin swept his power axe through the air above him, incinerating several of the rancid insects in the weapon's coruscating energy field.

A Nurgle Marine larger than the rest forced its way between its fellows, rising above them like a corpulent colossus, made big by the disease multiplying within every fibre of its body. The newcomer was without a helmet and clad in a patched suit of Terminator armour, emblazoned with the triple-sectioned fly badge favoured by some of the plague devotees. Rising from the backplate of its suit were three spikes, each skewered with a human head, faces elongated in death-screams, one still wearing the helm of a Cadian. A grotesque pus sac, barely contained within a bag of almost transparent skin, bulged and wobbled from its neck.

Servomotors squealing, Gdolkin leapt into the air. The servo-assisted exoskeleton of his power armour carried him over the fallen body of a Death Guard with a worm-ridden face and sent him crashing into the plague Terminator. As he hit his target he swung his power axe at the cultist, removing the trophy spikes as his opponent doubled up under Gdolkin's impact.

The Terminator crashed back into the mud and slime filling the bottom of the trench, sending a spume of filth fountaining into the air. Gdolkin landed awkwardly and compensated as best he could, coming into a crouched position. The Terminator struggled to rise, as it did so, raising the baroquely ornamented muzzle of its storm bolter.

The Iron-Father flung himself sideways as the storm bolter roared into life.

Gdolkin heard the impact of shells and a cry behind him. He dared a glance over his shoulder and saw Brother Oved standing exposed within the middle of the trench, shorn cables and ceramite splinters hanging from where his bionic right arm had been sheared off.

Despite the neural shock, Oved returned fire with the boltgun clasped tightly in his gleaming gunmetal left hand. Then Gdolkin was on his feet

and bringing his own axe down on the Chaos Terminator. The first blow struck the thick armour and was half-deflected in a spray of sparks as the Nurglite shifted again as it tried to get up. A round from Oved's bolter found the pus-sac beneath the creature's chin. It burst with a wet pop and Gdolkin recoiled as the greaves of his armour were splashed with viscous yellow fluid. Anger flared inside his chest and he drove in again with the axe.

The crackling tip of the energy-sheathed blade pierced the Terminator's deformed neck where it was exposed above the rim of its corroded helmet seal. Gdolkin twisted and the cultist's head came away in a torrent of corrupted black blood.

Joab XIII's heavy bolter exploded into life with a chugging roar, and one of the Death Guard, slime oozing from between the joints of its armour, faltered, millennia-aged ceramite plates fracturing under the impact of the high-calibre missiles.

Gdolkin turned his attention back towards the pack choking the trench. The Plague Marines were determined to halt the Iron Hands' advance but the destruction of the Terminator tempered their zeal born of a devotion to the corrupted Lord of Flies.

A cancerous black growth deforming the belly of another plague-creature, ruptured under a blow from Gdolkin's power axe, spewing tar-like slime from within its diseased mass. Brother Erastus had grasped a tentacled limb in his augmetic left hand as it tried to wrap its suckered, rubbery flesh around him, and tore it from the shoulder socket of the Plague Marine it was attached to.

Iron-Father Gdolkin's axe connected with the shoulder plate of a buboe-disfigured Marine. The corrupted ceramite splintered with a shearing of tortured metal. A black void opened up beneath it and a cloud of black bodies erupted from the hole with a buzzing roar. Gdolkin's vision went black as the flies bombarded his helmet, crawling all over its surface, looking for a way in. With even his augmetic eyes blinded by the dense living morass, Gdolkin swung at the tiny plague-carriers, but it was a futile effort. The energy field of the power axe sizzled and crackled as it burnt a path through the insects but it made little difference to the pestilential mass pouring from within the depths of the Death Guard's armour.

The Iron-Father railed against the impotency of his attack: that something so small should prove so resistant to his attacks!

Over the furious buzzing flies Gdolkin heard the *whomph* and hungry roar of a flamer firing. Brother Fundare had brought his weapon to bear. The Iron-Father began to see a corposant glow behind the black screen in front of his visor. He swept a gauntlet across his faceplate, crushing flies under his indelicate touch, smearing the disgusting sacs of their bristling bodies across his helmet.

The remains of the flies' host was burning furiously in the middle of the trench. At the death of their host whatever enchantment kept the insects attacking the Iron Hands was broken and the swarm dissipated into the air around them.

And then Squad Erastus and Iron-Father Gdolkin were through the line of Death Guard. Their assault on the Plague Marines' position had effectively driven a wedge through the heretic hordes on this front.

Gdolkin allowed himself a moment's exultant satisfaction: the steadfast might of the Sons of Ferrus Manus had overcome the corrupted Chaos Marines.

The great ordinatus engine rose up before them again, only now it seemed a more achievable objective.

The wall at an angled junction ahead of them had collapsed into the defile, creating a slope of spoil and earth leading up out of the labyrinthine network of trenches. Then the Iron-Father saw a shape looming up over the crest of the trench, between the Iron Hands and the ordinatus, that made their struggle so far seem like nothing more than a combat training session.

The monstrosity rose up before Iron-Father Gdolkin and his battle-brethren like some obscene amalgam of machine and unholy warp entity, a crab-like creature in form, all pistoning claw-limbs, studded with snagging barbs and cruel spikes. Mounted upon this clanking undercarriage was a baroquely forged gun-turret tank-body in which was contained the malevolent entity whose presence leaked from the rusted war engine like acid, tainting the very air around it with vileness. The main gargoylemouthed cannon of the monstrous construct was ably supported by the reaping gun of an autocannon of archaic design. A robotic arm flexed and stretched like living steel, culminating in a mass of mechadendrite tentacles, writhing with an unnatural life of their own.

Above the thorax portion of this oil- and slime-dripping creation of Chaos, a daemoniac visage, formed of rust-discoloured steel, stared down on the Space Marines, as if they were nothing more than insects, baleful witch-fires burning behind its eye-slits. A ragged plague standard fluttered in the steady wind blowing over the battlefield above the trench line bearing the unmistakable insignia of the Plague God and the name of the blasphemy: *Ebolus*. It stung Gdolkín's remaining biological eye to look upon it and he could see glyphs of the Lord of Decay forming in the rusty scars covering the metal of the machine. Each joint was emblazoned with the eight-pointed star of the Fell Powers.

Gdolkín shivered involuntarily. The whole horrific fusion of machine and Chaos-spawned daemon drew a toxic miasma of noxious fumes with it, more polluting than the industry-ruined atmosphere of Fornax Orbis Majoris. It clung to the construct like a second skin, and made the air feel greasy. Sooty exhaust turrets coughed yet more foulness into the air from the impossible engine, pounding its pistons inside the machine beast like the beating of some daemoniac metal heart.

'Ferrus be with me.' Gdolkín muttered, feeling the power source of his axe thrumming in his right hand. He unholstered his re-loaded bolt pistol and felt its reassuring weight in his left.

There was a throaty boom as the daemon-machine's main cannon fired, a few seconds' pause, and then somewhere behind the Space Marines' position Gdolkín heard the *crump* of an explosion accompanied by the shrill screams of men dying.

The defiler paused and then, with the protesting grinding of metal, angled its helm towards the Space Marines before it in the trench. Then, with spider-like movements of its limbs, the defiler tried to clamber into the trench. One pincer foot crashed down, splintering duckboards and throwing up sprays of filthy brown water.

The Iron Hands opened fire. Bolter shells impacted against the armoured hull and plasma flame burst across it in a wash of molten fire. And yet, despite the corroded appearance of the defiler's armour, it was surprisingly durable. The accursed war engine seemed to shrug off the Iron Hands' assault. Nothing was slowing it down. It was like something from the nightmares that had circulated within those systems bordering on the Eye of Terror for over a thousand years.

The daemon-engine returned fire. Autocannon shells raked up the ground between it and the Space Marines as the defiler lurched towards them, its port-side legs inside the trench whilst its others continued to run across the ground above.

Much as he hated to admit it, Iron-Father Gdolkín realised he had to give the command to retreat. To do so was not weakness, however. They were too vulnerable in this position to the defiler's guns, drawn out as they were along the trench. To retreat and reposition was good battle-sense.

'Back!' Gdolkín shouted into his helmet mic. 'We'll reposition at the last junction and take this Chaos-cursed machine out from behind cover. By Ferrus, we'll send this blasphemy to the spirit of the Omnissiah back to the hell that spawned it!'

At the Iron-Father's command, the black-armoured Marines turned and made their way back along the trench, past the bodies of the fallen Death Guard, Zorian and Naltech covering their retreat, with Joab XIII automatically watching Gdolkín's back.

But no matter how fast the Iron Hands moved, the powerful muscles of their genetically enhanced physiques assisted by various pistoning augmetics and the servomotors of their power armour, the scuttling daemon-engine was faster. And then the defiler was above them, its shadow hanging over them like the spectral shroud of death itself.

Tentacles telescoped down into the pit of the trench and snared Brother Oved in their snaking metal coils. Then Oved was gone, yanked out of the trench, helpless in the clutches of the daemon-engine.

As it passed overhead Gdolkín saw how massive the defiler truly was. He also glimpsed a peculiar metal plate beneath its undercarriage that seemed to pulse with unnatural organic life. Although he only glimpsed it for a split-second, the automatic targeting system of his ocular implant fixed the image inside its cogitator core. Gdolkín raised his gun and launched a shell into the discoloured metal. It exploded satisfyingly, spraying the trench walls with black bile.

But to the defiler, the shot had no more effect than a mosquito bite.

There was a wet thud next to Gdolkín and the Iron-Father glanced down. Lying in the liquid mud of the trench floor was Brother Oved's head. The bloodless, horrified expression made even Gdolkín feel uncertain for a moment, until he chastised himself angrily for admitting to a momentary lapse of weakness; that was all it would take to fail in his sacred duty to

Ferrus Manus and the Emperor. The defiler had effortlessly disassembled Oved into his organic and inorganic parts with its mechadendrite tentacles.

The defiler was now ahead of the running squad. It stopped, its hip-pivot spinning the turret-body around to face the Iron Hands again. The massive machine swayed unsteadily for a moment and another clawed foot came down into the trench only a matter of metres from Gdolkín.

The limb hit a servitor, crushing it underfoot, machine parts bursting through pallid dead flesh. Gun-servitor Gibeon was now just so much scrap metal.

By Medusa, this was getting them nowhere, Gdolkín thought. He had to try something else. First of all he had to get out of this damned trench to have any hope of stopping the daemon-engine. Perhaps he could get on top of it and take his axe to its toad-helmed head.

'Concentrate your fire at its underbody.' Gdolkín commanded and in a burst of bolter fire Squad Erastus obeyed.

Gdolkín took a frag grenade from the dispenser in his utility-belt. If he could distract or temporarily disorientate the defiler he might have a hope of stopping the Chaos-engine. He prepared to hurl the grenade into the air above him and onto the top of the defiler. Then he had another idea.

The filth and grease covered hydraulic joint of a clawed limb was next to him, the remains of Gibeon XII crushed beneath it. Quickly he pulled the pin and forced the grenade into the knurled cog-workings of the joint.

'Clear!' he shouted into the comm.

The squad scattered, only the servitors Joab XIII and Ishmael 192 maintaining the barrage against the defiler. Gdolkín threw himself at the side of the trench and scrambled up it, ceramite toecaps kicking footholds into the compacted earth.

The grenade detonated with a dull *crump* as Gdolkín cleared the top of the trench. Shrapnel peppered the trench wall behind and beneath him as the leg-joint was wreathed in smoke.

Gdolkín thought he heard a low growl. Pulling himself to his feet he turned to see the verdigrised head of the defiler turn to face him, the gaping black mouth of its battle cannon turning in his direction too.

Then he was running. He could hear the Ebolus climbing up out of the trench behind him, struggling with one seized limb. He could feel its footfalls pounding the ground. So far his plan was working, but now that he had the monstrous machine's attention what was he going to do?

He was back in no-man's-land. The landscape before him was a mess of churned mud, coiled razor wire and the skeletal wrecks that told of the mighty battle that had been waged here.

Then Gdolkin saw it: the blocky shape of a Chimera chassis, not thirty metres from his position. The vehicle was lying on its side, tracks torn and missing, bodies spilling out of it haphazardly, wearing the uniform of the tech-guard of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Whatever had taken out the Chimera and its crew hadn't damaged its shell magazine, otherwise there wouldn't have been anything left of the vehicle at all.

It should at least provide some cover, the Iron-Father thought, and he began powering towards it. There was the subsonic retort of a heavy weapon firing and Gdolkin flung himself forward just a split-second before the ground erupted behind him at the shuddering impact of a shell fired from the defiler's main cannon. Mud and fragments of rock-crete rained down on the Iron Hand but in a second he was up and running again.

He slewed to a halt around the side of the Chimera as the defiler hobbled after him, an abrasive bark being emitted from the vox-grille of its amphibian-helm, the throbbing of its engine accompanying it with a low-pitched, bestial growl.

Gdolkin was aware of an acid hiss. Scanning the exposed underside of the Chimera he was now sheltering behind, he saw that its fuel cell had ruptured and was leaking.

Then he knew how he could stop the accursed Ebolus.

Gdolkin's servo-arm clamp pulled open the damaged panel covering the Chimera's fuel cell whilst with his two free hands he planted more of the frag grenades he was carrying in the battery breach. He could hear the daemon-engine's snarls nearer now. It was almost on top of him.

He pulled away just as a pincer appeared over the top of the side of the tank. Bolt pistol in hand he backed away rapidly as the defiler took hold of the hull of the Chimera in its massive front cutter-claws and with a deafening screeching began to tear the chassis apart in angry frustration.

Gdolkin took aim, his ocular implant targeters locking onto the breach in the battery core, and fired. A single miniature mass-reactive missile shot from the gun and struck one of the grenades planted inside the fuel cell cavity. There was the explosion of a frag grenade detonating followed a split-second later by the boom of the battery core detonating and the contents of the Chimera's magazine with it.

The battlefield was lit up as the defiler disappeared in a sheet of incandescent flame. Gdolkín felt the heat-wash of the explosion as the Shockwave of the blast bowled him over.

For a moment the Iron-Father was blinded again as his eyes - organic and augmetic - adjusted to the brilliance of the flare of the explosion. As he blinked his vision clear he saw the broken carcass of the Chaos-engine lying at the edge of a wide crater where the wrecked Chimera had been only moments before. The defiler was lying on one side, claw-limbs buckled and fused beneath it. Its other legs twitched in the air. There was a grating, clunking sound as the daemon-machine tried to turn its ruptured turret-body and right itself. There was nothing left of the defiler's mechadendrite tentacles.

Iron-Father Gdolkín approached the Ebolus with measured steps. He bolstered his bolt pistol and hefted his power axe in both hands. His eyes locked on the exposed scabrous metal-flesh underbelly that was leaking gouts of black bile. He was still dwarfed by the monstrous Chaos-construct. A palpable sense of malevolent evil emanated from the blasphemy, that made him stay his hand - but only for a moment.

Gdolkín raised the power axe above his head. 'Ferrus guide my hand,' he said then brought the crackling blade down into the ruptured mess.

The defiler gave one last metallic scream as Gdolkín felt a jet of hot air vent into his face. The war machine spasmed epileptically, a lashing leg connecting with the Space Marine and kicking him aside. The belly of the metal-beast seemed to swell and then, with a daemoniac howl, the defiler was torn apart by an explosion of unleashed warp-energies.

The explosion lifted Gdolkín into the air, sending him hurtling across the battlefield, and as the shock-wave hit him, his conscious mind was hurled into dark oblivion.

SIX

APOCALYPSE ENGINE

THE LAND-LEVIATHAN ORDINATUS *GEHENNA*

'AND MY ORDERS are to destroy target zero-alpha utterly,' Arch-Magos Schrodinger railed, the two servo-limbs extending from his shoulder blades jerking angrily.

'But we are so close now,' the other persisted. 'We could liberate the target and study its secrets, to the benefit and greater glory of the Cult Mechanicus.'

'Liberate it? *Liberate it!*' Schrodinger shrieked, causing the half-human swan-winged familiar fluttering at his shoulder to take flight from its enraged master into the vaulted ceiling space of the command bridge. 'Have you taken leave of your senses?' Schrodinger challenged his rival. '*Gehenna* is overrun. Our own tech-guard forces are fighting a losing battle. The heretics almost have us and you are saying that we should liberate their mountain stronghold site? Are you insane?'

His rival appeared to ignore the comment and instead continued in his tirade against the arch-magos's determination to destroy the target. 'The Omnissiah only knows what the mining teams uncovered there. If it hadn't been for this ill-timed invasion we *would* know by now. It could be a planetary governor's ransom in lost archeotech, a previously forgotten power source. It could even be a lost STC!'

'I don't believe it! And even if it were the case, as I have tried to tell you, we are in no position to free the site. Our beleaguered forces are barely able to hold this bridge, let alone beat back the enemy's front line and take back the Argentum range. The rebels have breached our hull and even now our adepts are having to fight simply to hold their positions. If we do not charge the cannon and fire now we may be too late to do anything!'

'You know as well as I that there is something... special about the target.' The other wouldn't let it lie. He was like a rad-rat worrying at a scavenged carcass. 'And yet you would still go ahead and destroy it, when Mars only knows the secrets that it could reveal to us, to you?'

'My orders are to destroy it!' Schrodinger roared, physically shaking now.

'Your orders,' the other priest mocked, his tone derisive.

'Yes my orders, that come ultimately from the Warmaster himself! It is the will of the Ommissiah. It is the will of the Emperor.'

The two technomagi faced each other, augmetic eyes glowing a ferocious red, poised like two rutting bull grox.

'And it is *my* intention to carry those orders out, or do you forget who is in command here?'

The other said nothing for a moment, his breathing loud and laboured, huffing snorts coming from amidst the metal components of his face.

Schrodinger turned back to the green-glowing monitor of his lectern, the flickering screen overlaying his flesh and metal features with a network of fluorescent contour lines.

'Cannon batteries to full power!' Schrodinger commanded, righteous anger boiling in the blood and lubricating fluid running through his plastek-sheeted veins. 'Cogitator-targeters on-line. Align the apocalypse cannon.'

Adepts relayed the arch-magos's commands to a bank of servitor-drones, locked into their console positions. A hundred cogitator-melded minds calculated firing solutions. The bridge echoed with the rattle of digits inputting algorithms into console-lecterns accompanied by the whistles and hums of the praying tech-priests intoning their various incantations of operation, to appease and encourage the machine-spirits of the ancient ordinatus.

'If you do this, you and all mankind will come to regret it,' the interloper said in a dark whisper.

The arch-magos turned back on the other tech-priest as fast as a striking arco-flagellant.

'All mankind? Is this some kind of threat?'

'We could lose this war.'

'In the name of Red Mars is there more to this that you're not telling me?'

The thrumming of hydraulic pistons the size of hive-spires could be felt even here, on the command bridge, as the arch-magos's commands took effect.

'In the name of the holy Ommissiah, man! What is it? What aren't you telling me?'

Involuntarily a telescoping servo-limb shot out and grabbed hold of the cadaverously tall tech-priest by the rough crimson cloth of his robe.

There was a commotion beneath the jutting platform on which the arch-magos and the other tech-priest stood. A tech-guard captain had run onto the command bridge, the red of his uniform stained even darker by his own blood, a thick wound opened up across his forehead and a mirroring gash through the electronics of his targeter-sight. 'My lord arch-magos!' the captain called. Servo-limbs twitching in irritated agitation, Schrodinger let go of his sparring partner and turned his attention to the new arrival. 'What is it, captain? Time is of the essence.'

'Our position is becoming untenable, my lord magos,' the captain said breathless, despairing panic and blood loss draining the colour from his cheeks. 'The traitors have taken decks Quintus, Sextus and Septus. And such horrors I have never seen. The foul spawn of disease and decay.'

'What about the generarium levels?' Schrodinger asked, locating those same areas of the ordinatus on his console monitor, tapping the wire-frame images dotted with flashing red and amber runes that appeared before him as a consequence of his adjustments of the knurled brass knobs and switches.

'Squads Delta and Epsilon are holding out down there, sir. Squad Gamma is also still managing to repel the enemy from the transmitter array.'

'Very good, captain. Then we know what must be done.'

Schrodinger looked to a control wand-bearing adept who waited at the edge of the command platform. 'Are the batteries charged? Is the apocalypse cannon ready?'

'Currently at sixty-three point seven-five per cent of optimum power levels. Operative capability at eighty-two per cent,' the adept intoned.

'Don't do this, Schrodinger!' the other snarled, taking an ominous step towards the ordinatus's commander, and most senior representative of the Adeptus Mechanicus on board.

'Keep back,' the arch-magos snarled, silvered spider limbs reaching for the tech-priest once more.

Over the machine-cant droning of the tech-adepts and the emotionless, monotone voice of servitors reporting the status of the myriad systems of the monstrous ordinatus, Schrodinger's enhanced hearing discerned a new sound, that of the arrival of new combatants in the battle taking place beyond the bulkhead of the command bridge.

The *zap-fizz* of lasguns discharging had been joined by the deeper, throatier rattling roar of bolter fire. He could hear shouts too, a booming, commanding voice issuing orders and the curses of others as they took on the traitorous foe.

An explosion rocked the bridge. The Omnissiah-alone-knew what had hit to cause such a shuddering impact aboard the ordinatus. A cloud of spark-shot smoke gusted onto the lower deck of the vaulted command chamber.

Three figures emerged from the smoke, wreathed in tendrils of black smoke. They towered over the tech-adepts scurrying in panic before them, their blackened armour making them seem even larger.

The first of the Space Marines, bolt pistol in one silvered hand, power axe in the other, looked up at the command platform and the arguing tech-priests standing there. Schrodinger looked back uncertainly. A calliper-clamp servo-arm also turned to take in the arch-magos. It would appear that reinforcements had arrived after all.

'Which of you is Magos Omega Thule?' the Marine's voice boomed. Schrodinger recognised it as the one he had heard shouting orders beyond the bulkhead of the bridge.

Arch-Magos Schrodinger's rival turned and fixed the Space Marine with the glittering gaze of his red-lensed augmetic eye. 'Ah, I see the noble Iron Hands have remembered their ancient oaths and arrived at last.'

'Are you Magos Thule?' the Space Marine repeated.

The cadaverous figure stepped forward.

'I am Magos Omega Tetrohimus Thule,' he said. 'And who might you be?'

'I am Iron-Father Anatolus Gdolkon of the Adeptus Astartes Iron Hands' Chapter.'

IRON-FATHER GDOLKIN gave the tech-priest another appraising look, now that he and his honour guard of servitors and fellow Space Marines had ascended to the command platform. The acolyte was extremely tall - as tall as a Space Marine in fact - and cadaverously thin. His red, cog-tooth patterned robe hung loosely about his slender frame, making it appear as though the slightest gust of wind would send him toppling over.

The only parts of Thule visible beneath the priest's ceremonial robe were his face and his hands. His face was a knot of scar tissue and cybernetic enhancements. As far as Gdolkin could tell, fully half the magos's head was a polished steel cranium, complete with augmetic ocular implant, and the entirety of his lower jaw mandible. His hands appeared human enough but both were etched with a tracery of electrum circuitry that culminated in chromed nails at his fingertips.

What there was left of the tech-priest's skin was wrinkled with age. Of course there was no way of accurately determining the man's age. His face might physically appear to be that of an octogenarian but the Iron Hands were more aware than most of the anti-aging effects cybernetic augmentations had on the human body and it was common knowledge that the acolytes of the Cult Mechanicus extended their longevity beyond the natural span through the use of juvenat treatments.

It was rumoured that the masters of the Adeptus Mechanicus were able to extend their lives for hundreds, possibly even thousands, of years by means of ancient genetic replication vats. In this way they maintained their stranglehold on the secrets of technology that lay buried beneath the Cult Mechanicus's planetary realm of Mars. According to the technomagi of the Machine Cult, knowledge was the supreme manifestation of divinity, and all creatures or artefacts that embodied knowledge were holy and worthy of veneration as a consequence. So it was their belief that an individual's worth was only the sum of his knowledge, the human body simply an organic machine capable of preserving intellect - and an imperfect one at that.

Hence the servants of the Machine God manipulated their own bodies, replacing parts wholesale with archaic bionics, implanting cogitator chips directly into their brain tissue, the better to retain the information they so voraciously hunted and jealously hoarded.

The dark irony of the matter was that the minds of the technomagi continued to decay no matter what life-extending techniques they applied.

As the endless centuries wore on, the masters of the Cult Mechanicus grew increasingly mentally unstable, their grip on reality slipping into a haze of superstition that had more to do with blood sacrifice and madness than archeo-science and occult technology. Such was not the way of the Sons of Ferrus.

Gdolkin's two service studs denoted over two hundred years of service to the Imperium, fighting the enemies of mankind on all fronts, wherever, and whatever, they might be. The Omnissiah alone knew how long Magos Thule had been bound to the service of Mars, searching for lost archeotech treasures across the countless worlds that fell within the all-encompassing Imperium of Mankind.

'And are you in charge here?' Gdolkin asked.

'Unfortunately not,' Thule replied bitterly.

'No, that is my responsibility,' the other tech-priest said emphatically. A white-feathered cherub-familiar, its face a mass of brass finished implants, descended from the darkness of the bridge's vault to alight on one of two additional robotic arms the shorter magos had grafted to his shoulder blades. His train, however, was longer than that of Magos Thule's and another infant-homunculus bore it up in grubby hands, in an attempt to keep the ornately embroidered cloth off the ground. 'I am Arch-Magos Cthulius Helphasian Schrodinger. And what brings you here, Iron-Father? Are you here to break the heretic siege of great *Gehenna*?' The half-skull, half-machine face of the Machina Opus gazed at Gdolkin with a hollow-eyed, soulless stare.

Gdolkin was aware that his own armour was dented and scratched down to the bare ceramite in places, hardly worthy of an audience with one of the masters of the Cult Mechanicus, but this was war and as such his appearance couldn't be helped.

'My brothers and I have come to this Emperor-forsaken forge world to find Magos Thule, for it was he who has called on the ancient bonds forged between our Chapter and your holy organisation in times past, asking for our aid in this war against the Despoiler's thirteenth black crusade.'

Arch-magos Schrodinger looked somewhat taken aback. The grotesque cherub-familiar and the train-holder both reflexively made the sign of the Holy Machine. This obviously wasn't the answer the arch-magos had been expecting. Magos Thule had been a thorn in Schrodinger's side ever since

he arrived on this planet and now it turned out that he was the one calling the shots after all.

'Begging your pardon, arch-magos,' an adept said, scurrying onto the command platform and giving a reverential bow as he did so, his voice distorted into electronic tones by the reverberations of a vox implanted into his throat.

'What is it?' the arch-magos muttered irritably.

'Apocalypse cannon energy levels now at seventy-nine point nine-nine per cent,' the adept informed his master.

Thule might be calling the shots at this moment, regarding the Space Marines, but he wasn't calling *all* the shots.

'Prepare final firing solutions,' Schrodinger commanded, ignoring the Iron Hands again, his orders being passed down the line to adepts, gun-crews and senators throughout the leviathan land-gun.

'What is going on?' the towering Iron-Father demanded, tact and patience clearly not amongst his virtues.

'Schrodinger, don't do this!' Magos Thule commanded. 'I'm warning you!'

Gdolkin looked at the two sparring tech-priests in bewilderment.

'Get rid of this turbulent priest!' the arch-magos wailed. 'Iron-Father, seize this cogitae-addled fool.'

'Cannon levels at eighty-one point zero-six per cent.'

Gdolkin looked at Schrodinger askance, indignant anger burning through his red-eyed gaze. Who did this Mechanicus adept think he was, making such demands of one of the Adeptus Astartes? The relationship between the Iron Hands and the Machine Cult dated back thousands of years, and was based on mutual trust and respect.

'We have come here for Thule.' Gdolkin growled.

'Then take him!' Schrodinger railed.

'Eighty-two per cent achieved. Battery levels still rising.'

'Prepare to fire,' the arch-magos instructed his attending adepts.

'Ignore that last command.' Thule bellowed, freezing the adepts to the spot.

'What?' Schrodinger screeched.

The Iron Hands looked on with unimpressed expressions. Why were these two men of authority behaving like bickering schola students?

'Arch-Magos Schrodinger is unsound of mind. I am seizing control of this vessel, for the good of the Imperium.' Thule declared.

'I do not believe I am hearing this! The target must be destroyed!' Schrodinger turned to Gdolkin once again. 'Seize this man!'

With a bestial scream Thule threw himself at the arch-magos, two previously hidden mechadendrite tentacles tearing through the fabric of his robe, extending outwards to grab Schrodinger.

Acting instinctively, Gdolkin made a lunge for the rabid tech-priest and hauled him back, locking his arms under and around Thule's shoulders. The ensnared magos spat and kicked, his mechadendrite limbs writhing in fury, mere centimetres from the arch-magos. Schrodinger's cherub-familiar had taken to the air again in fearful anxiety.

One who did not understand the level of cybernetic enhancement the Adeptus Mechanicus had mastered, as Gdolkin did, might have been surprised at the strength the stick-thin tech-priest demonstrated. But it was nothing compared to the musculature and power armour-assisted might of a Space Marine. There was nothing Magos Thule could do as long as he remained in Gdolkin's grasp.

'The target must be destroyed!' Schrodinger reiterated. 'In the name of the Ommissiah, fire!'

A deep, subsonic thrumming seized the command bridge. A column of caged glow-globes set inside the carved visage of the Machina Opus lit one after another until almost all of them were glowing brightly, indicating that cannon levels were at maximum.

The throbbing vibrations increased. Gdolkin could feel them pulsing right to his very core. He wondered whether the noise would have been causing him pain if it wasn't for his Lyman's Ear.

Suddenly a high-pitched whine began to reverberate throughout the bridge, the pitch descending rapidly as the glow-globe monitor of the apocalypse cannon's readiness began to dim, the scale dropping as it did so. There was no earth-shaking roar of the apocalypse cannon firing, no quaking as the massive ordinatus subsequently suffered the tremors initiated by the doomsday weapon, just the steady descending pitch of generator batteries losing power.

'What in the name of Mars is going on?' the arch-magos shrieked, almost hysterically.

There was a flurry of activity amongst the tech-adepts. The arch-magos's cherubim shot anxious darting glances between each other, making a cluttering whistling sound as they did so.

'Power to the apocalypse cannon has been cut,' a black-robed adept piped up at last.

Gdolkin realised that Magos Thule had ceased his struggling.

'Why? What has happened?' Schrodinger was beside himself. His guardianship of this ancient war engine had brought the ordinatus to the very brink of destruction.

'What *is* going on?' the Iron-Father added his own angry enquiry to the fray.

'Augurs report that Generarium Primus is under heretic control, my lords,' another machine-acolyte said, the anxiety clear in his voice. 'As long as it remains so we cannot fire the cannon.'

'Then our moment has passed. We are too late. The foe will be victorious here.'

'What?' Gdolkin roared turning on the arch-magos, releasing his grip on Thule and casting him aside. 'You would admit defeat already? You who command one of the legendary ancients of the ordinatus legions?'

The Iron-Father was face-to-face with Schrodinger now: his voice rang from his helmet speakers, echoing through the vaulted space of the bridge deck.

'You should be ashamed of yourself, an arch-magos of the vaunted Adeptus Mechanicus giving in to the Emperor's enemies so readily! Such weakness! Your behaviour makes my blood boil!'

The Iron-Father pulled back from the quaking Schrodinger. Thule watched from the edge of the platform, something mantis-like and predatory about his posture and his gaze. The two other Iron Hands, and the accompanying weapons-servitor automata, stood motionless as statues behind him.

'This is not over yet. If it is the will of the Omnissiah that Ordinatus *Gehenna* completes its preordained task then, by the Light-Bringer, so it shall!'

Thule made a hissing noise, but said nothing.

'Gdolkin to all units,' the Iron-Father intoned into his helmet mic, turning and descending the stairs from the elevated command platform.

'Converge on generarium level alpha. There is a canker aboard this ancient god-engine that has to be purged.'

GDOLKIN CUT DOWN the traitor Guardsman with one sweep of his axe, bisecting the hollow-eyed madman's body from neck to groin. The insurrectionist Chaos-lover collapsed in a slurry of intestines and other internal organs. And then the Iron Hands and their tech-guard allies were through into the vaulted chamber of Generarium Primus.

After battling the Death Guard on the acid-scorched battlefield to get on board the ordinatus, the Iron Hand squads had reconvened again. There had been losses amongst Melchor's squad as well. Initiate Gob-ard had been cut down by a Death Guard Terminator and Brother Betorin's bionic right leg had been severely damaged by a mine. Librarian Melchor appeared to have come out the battle unscathed so far, unlike Gdolkin, although his cyber-cherub was showing signs of light shrapnel wounding.

Gdolkin's encounter with the defiler had left him and his armour bruised and battered. He had noticed a two point six-zero-one per cent drop in his power armour's servos' operational effectiveness.

Upon leaving the presence of the arguing tech-priests the Sons of Ferrus had fought their way through the barricades being erected outside the command deck of the *Gehenna*, through the shell-holed outer hull corridors that led to the main access shafts, down through the cultist-held turbine chambers to the apocalypse cannon's generator decks. Here they were meting out the Emperor's justice to traitor Guardsmen, heretic techs and indentured workers, all of whom fought bitterly with whatever weapons they could find.

Deep inside the bowels of the ordinatus, a full four hundred metres from the command bridge, the adamantium-pillared hall containing the archeo-machinery of Generarium Primus was as large as an Ecclesiarchy world's major shrine. Across the floor of the echoing chamber, amidst the forest of columns, Gdolkin could see yet more of the enemy clearing out the last pockets of resistance still holding out against them. The snap of las-fire and the rattle of autoguns rang from columns and buttresses. But such matters were academic now, for the heretics already held the main control tower. As long as that was the case, there was no hope of Arch-Magos Schrodinger and the *Gehenna* completing their mission.

'Onward, warriors of iron!' Iron-Father Gdolkin bellowed into the comm. His men didn't need to be told twice.

The Iron Hands waded into the fray, the traitorous Guardsmen, forge workers and tech-adepts, believing they had as good as won here, suddenly finding the tables turned on them. There was little they could do against the determined Space Marines, warriors who had been bio-engineered to be superhuman. For all their efforts, the attacks of the heretic cultists had no effect at all.

The plague servants' faith in Father Nurgle, however, made them bold. They ran readily to their deaths on the end of the Iron Hands' chainswords in order to further the Plague Lord's plans. The Space Marines cut down their foetid attackers like stalks of corn.

The Iron Hands were accompanied by the tech-guard troopers of Captain Skon Thrask's Squad Alpha. At their arrival, the generarium's defenders rallied, drawing on new reserves of strength and stamina, born of hope and determination. Amongst them were the beleaguered survivors of Squads Delta and Epsilon, from the ordinatus's own defence force. Despite their own advanced augmentations, and their valiant attempt to hold back the tide of the invading Chaos forces, the numbers ranged against them had appeared insurmountable. Now it seemed, however, that victory might very well be plucked from the steel jaws of defeat.

But there were other things here too that presented more of a challenge to the seventeen remaining Iron Hands. At the core a contingent of Death Guard Plague Marines had coordinated the capture of Generarium Primus. With the primary generator complex under their control, the Death Guard could bring about the destruction of Ordinatus *Gehenna* in its entirety if they so desired, if that was indeed their intention.

The miasma of death and putrefaction was even heavier here. The recycled air was thick with the all-pervading essence of evil. Other things were moving amongst the leprous rabble, things that had no right to even exist: the sickly physical manifestation of the Plague Lord's gifts, their long-fingered touch granting their victims those same gifts with virulent efficiency.

Iron-Father Gdolkin carried out a swift scan of the chamber to assess the situation.

'Captain Thrask,' he said, flicking open the channel to the Iron Hands' tech-guard allies with a synapse-thought. 'If we can get you and your men

to that command tower, will you be able to restore operation of the generarium to the bridge?'

'W-We can try.' Thrask replied uncertainly.

'You can *try*?' Gdolkin challenged, not liking the doubt in the tech-guard's voice. Doubt implied weakness and weakness led inevitably to failure.

'Put it this way. It'll be the best chance we have if great *Gehenna* is to complete its mission in time.'

'Then so be it. Your objective is to climb that tower and restore control of the generarium to the bridge.' Gdolkin stated coldly. There would be no debating the matter.

And with that the Iron Hands threw themselves at the enemy again, bolter, chainsword, axe and fist laying waste to the heretics before them.

With a cry of, "For Ferrus and Medusa!" Librarian Melchor, his bald head and psy-sensitive hood crackling with lambent lightning, turned on a Plague Marine with slime dripping from its breathing tube and, in a blaze of magnesium bright light, obliterated the disease-ridden abomination with a single blast of thought.

Sergeant Erastus and Battle-Brother Taudis gunned down a heretic censer-bearer, his robes daubed with mind-warping sigils that spoke of new and traitorous allegiances. The smoking censer shattered on the iron floor of the chamber in a cloud of foul green fumes that choked the stale, ozone-tinged air.

Fundare, also from Erastus's squad, doused a squealing, shrieking plague-thing, its malformed body sporting only a single eye and a single horn, its bloated gut a mass of suppurating pustules. The abomination was sent screaming across the hall in a blaze of fire, gouts of blackening orange flame flying from it and igniting the filthy robes and clothes of other turncoat acolytes and troopers.

Yet another of the relentless Nurgle Marines loomed large before Gdolkin. The Iron-Father let out an involuntary gasp. Even he had seen few sights as appalling as this one. The Lord of Decay might grant his servants a repulsive aspect, but he did not so readily accompany such gifts with mutation. However, this was not the case of this debased Plague Marine. The Nurgle worshipper's head had changed into that of a facet-eyed fly, a tubular pink tongue as long as the haft of Gdolkin's power axe darting from an obscene insect proboscis.

How could a Space Marine brother of one of the First Founding Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, who had been implanted with the gene-seed the immortal Emperor himself had engineered, have become as corrupted as this?

Gdolkin gave vent to his anger and horror with a vehement cry of, "Die, plague spawn!" cutting down the fly-headed monstrosity with repeated blows of his crackling, energy-sheathed axe, before the vile thing even had time to raise its own corrupted bolt pistol.

And then they were through and the tech-guard were running past them, up the spiralling iron stairs to the top of the chamber's elevated central control tower. A flailing heretic fell past Gdolkin, screaming, as Captain Thrask and his men neutralised the resistance awaiting them at the top of the iron-latticed tower.

And yet still the plague devotees continued to throw themselves onto the Iron Hands' guns. The pox-ridden servants' faith in Father Nurgle had made them bold: bold and stupid, and insensitive to pain. They ran readily to their deaths on the end of the Iron Hands' chainswords, sacrificing great numbers simply to further the Plague Lord's perverse plan.

A yowling beast, all clawing talons and gaping intestinal abscesses, flung itself at Gdolkin. He kicked out at the daemon-creature from the step from which he was defending the control turret, his bionically assisted kick shattering its jaw and spraying deformed fang, black bile and scrofulous flesh into the battling mass behind.

The plaguebearer looked at the Iron-Father, its single jaundiced eye fixing him with a blood-shot stare of brooding hatred. Then, with a suddenness of speed that alarmed even the fast-reacting Space Marine, it lashed out with the raking claws of its talons. Claws like steel needles tore through the ceramite greaves of Gdolkin's left leg and snagged a piston part of the Iron-Father's artificial leg. He was immediately aware of a drop in effectiveness in that limb that was echoed by the runes appearing in the red glow of his heads-up visor display.

That was all it took. Bellowing with rage, Gdolkin turned his bolt pistol on the plague-beast. The scene of carnage was lit by the strobing muzzle-flash of the pistol firing as the unreal ectoplasmic fabric of the daemon was shredded by the exploding bolter shells. In seconds all that was left of the monster was a rapidly dissolving, bubbling mess of green slime dripping through the gaps in the grilled floor of the chamber.

'Iron-Father.' Gdolkin heard Captain Thrask's panting voice over his helmet comm.

'Report your status,' he returned, his voice cold, hard steel again.

'Generarium controls have been restored to the bridge.'

The heretics' sabotage attempt had been thwarted.

'Magos Schrodinger.' Gdolkin said, switching to a different channel with a thought, 'power is restored.'

'THANK THE OMNISSIAH, yes!' Arch-Magos Schrodinger declared, his tone euphoric. '*Gehenna* is restored to us!'

'Power levels at seventy-seven per cent, and rising,' the monitoring adept stated. 'Seventy-eight, seventy-nine, eighty—'

'This is your last chance.' Thule said, stalking towards Schrodinger across the bridge command platform.

'Eighty-one, eighty-two—'

The commander of the *ordinatus* shot his rival a poisonous dart of unashamed hatred. There were no words spoken in defence of his actions now, no recriminations.

'Fire!' Schrodinger spat the word with vehemence, giving the command even in the face of Magos Thule's protests.

The arch-magos's command was relayed throughout the stations of the command nave in seconds. The rising hum of the powering apocalypse cannon became a painful shriek. The *ordinatus* shook with the barely contained forces pulsing through the ancient machine.

The cannon fired.

Thule screamed.

A PULSE OF crimson light erupted from the mouth of the enormous cannon, wreathed in coruscating beams of barbed orange lightning, waves of power evaporating to heat and melting the fog of war from above the battlefield accompanied by a hurricane-force wind.

In the distance, still some kilometres away, amidst the stripped bare bedrock of the Argentum Mountains, lay the focus around which the Plague God's forces had gathered like flies around a corpse.

The apocalypse beam cut through the roiling clouds circling above the ragged peaks, burning away the unnatural night that claimed dominion

over the mountains in a searing blaze of light that was indeed like the light of apocalyptic oblivion.

The cannon's beam hit the mountainside with all the force of a crashing meteorite. The mountain exploded, shards of rock the size of hive towers splintering away from the face of the target. The foothills of the Argentum range were buried by a tumultuous landslide, sheets of rock plummeting down the mountainsides. Cataclysmic booms shook the spine of the mountain range.

The beam continued to bore its way through the bedrock, into the planet, like a Mechanicus mining machine, the land for a radius of twenty kilometres around suffering seismic disturbances violent enough to topple tall buildings. The very ground beneath great *Gehenna* shook, so that barely a man was left standing on board the monumental vessel. It felt as if the recoil forces unleashed by the firing of the cannon were going to shake the wounded *ordinatus* apart.

A great gout of broiling lava vomited skyward as the apocalypse cannon's beam finally punctured a magma vent deep beneath the earth. Whatever lay within the mountains that was of such importance to the Death Guard and the other heretics was buried, destroyed in the volcanic heat of the gushing lava flow. Thousands of ravening cultists and their Nurgle Marine overseers dissolved in the fiery flood that erupted from beneath the planet, as if *Fornax Orbis Majoris* was at last being avenged upon its pillagers.

But if the violent seismic activity caused by the apocalypse cannon's blast had seemed terrible, it was as nothing compared to the devastation that came in its wake.

It was as if all sound was sucked into the crater that had been created by *Gehenna's* cannon, for the briefest moment, only to be replaced seconds later by a subsonic *whomph* that passed through everyone and everything within a ten kilometre radius. And this was only the atmospheric pressurising precursor to the Shockwave that was coming.

Whatever it was that Arch-Magos Schrodinger had ordered the destruction of had been an artefact of immeasurable eldritch power. Waves of green energy doppled outwards from the epicentre of the ordinate's strike, rolling across the ravaged landscape in a wave-front a hundred metres high. The bow-wave consumed all before it. Troopers, both loyalist and traitor, were vaporised where the coruscating tidal wave touched them.

The only combatants who were safe from the devastating attack were those who had been able to take cover within dugouts and sheltered trench formations, but even they suffered terrible burns from the heat-wash that subsumed them.

Manufactory sheds were flattened, tanks were thrown kilometres away to come crashing down amidst the trenches of the battlefield outside the ancient war engine itself. Chaos creatures were eradicated, men died. Nothing was left whole as the bow-wave of rippling energy ate up all before it, bathing Fornax Orbis Majoris in its deep-ocean glow; nothing but scorched earth was left.

And there was something else. Shapes flickered and capered in the retina-searing light. Those hypnotised by the roiling energy field before it consumed them, believed they could see eldritch creatures writhing within the explosion of light from the epicentre of the blast.

After forty-two seconds the Shockwave hit the mighty Ommissiah's ancient leviathan *Gehenna*. The esoteric energy beams blasted through the gaping holes torn in the damaged hull as the massive war machine rocked under the phenomenal battering. Those not protected inside the undamaged parts of the ordinatus were killed just like the Chaos forces who had sought to unleash the same terrifying power to further their own ends. Two hundred and fifty-six tech-priest adepts, crew ratings and tech-guard troopers died, immolated by the atomic heat of the all-destroying energy waves. Not one Iron Hand was killed.

The blast was registered by the Imperial commanders buried within the bunker command post of Ferroturitus Prime Guard HQ, the lights going out for twenty seconds and dust falling from cracks that appeared in the ruptured ferrocrete ceiling.

It was even detected by the Iron Hands' strike cruiser waiting in geostationary orbit above the northern land mass of the poisoned forge world. The dissipating energy waves buffeted the *Ajax*, causing a drop in operating efficiency of thirty-three per cent across its void shields, and knocking out ship-to-planet comms that were not restored for another six minutes.

The released energy continued on and out into the black void, drawn inexorably towards the roiling boundaries of the distant, red-tinged gaze of the Eye of Terror.

'THANKS TO YOU and your men, *Gehenna* has been saved; if not the whole of Fornax Orbis Majoris.' Arch-Magos Schrodinger reported enthusiastically. 'Indeed it would appear that the enemy's hold on the Argentum Mountains has been broken. Victory will belong to the Adeptus Mechanicus in the final reckoning of things on this planet.'

Magos Thule, stood to one side, said nothing, silently fuming.

Iron-Father Gdolkin, helmet held now under one arm, looked at the ordinatus's commander with an impassive steely gaze.

'My thanks seem so inadequate considering the circumstances.' Schrodinger went on.

'Your thanks are not necessary. We fight to serve the Emperor, that is all.'

'Then I call down the blessings of the Omnissiah upon you and your men.'

'Are we done here?' Gdolkin asked, turning to address the skulking, sour-faced Thule.

The Iron-Father was keen that they be on their way. Medusa awaited. The sooner the Iron Hands fulfilled their ancient oath to Magos Thule, the sooner they could return to take part in the defence of their home-world.

Thule's obvious anger boiled around him, an almost palpable presence, like a barely restrained slaving beast, ready to strike in a second.

The tech-priest turned and stormed from the command platform of the bridge, the heavy sackcloth of his robes scraping across the wrought-iron plates of the floor. 'We have wasted enough time here already. It is time we were gone from here.'

Gdolkin and his honour guard followed. As they descended the steps from the command platform, Thule addressed the Space Marines' priest-techsmith without once turning to look at him.

'I would remind you, Iron-Father, that you and your men have signed yourselves over to my command. Do not treat me so poorly again. You may feel that you have wrought a great victory here, but the truth is your actions have merely contributed to the plans of the enemy and make our mission now all the more desperate! Let us be gone from here before you can do any more damage.'

Gdolkin's mind reeled. He was stunned into silence. To think that his actions had in some way aided the enemy was unconscionable. He would never - could never - do such a thing. And yet the doubt remained. Had he

in some way shown weakness in his actions, allowing the Despoiler's forces to advance their blasphemous usurping plans? Had his actions in some way been the result of some fatal flaw, some weakness on his part?

'To think, Iron-Father.' Thule went on, 'you may have brought destruction upon the vast, majestic Imperial realm. Your actions may have damned us all.'

HEROD

*'From the fires of betrayal,
Unto the blood of revenge
We bring the word of Lorgar
The Bearer of the Word
The Favoured Son of Chaos...
To turn the galaxy red with blood
And feed the hunger of the gods.'*

**- Excerpted from the three hundred and forty-first
*Book of The Epistles of Lorgar***

SEVEN

CHASING BEI'BUL

THE CITADEL OF ANTIPAX, AFTER THE HARROWING

DAGAN TUMBLED THROUGH the cold rushing wind. He straightened his body, forming it into a plummeting spear of iron. An altimeter display in his helmet visor showed the distance between him and the desert city dropping away in a blur of rushing runes, hurtling downwards like the missile of his own body.

Around him, the Iron Hands of his assault squad dropped through the twisting thermals like boulders. Above them the *Iron Eagle* dwindled to a distant speck, as the Thunderhawk gunship powered away amidst a flurry of flak fired from the heretics' macro guns.

Veteran Sergeant Dagan focused again on the shape of the desert city of Antipax, which looked like the stain of a braise amid the blanched ochre of the desert wasteland. The city was roughly circular in form, a high curtain wall of yellow stone containing a labyrinthine network of shadowed streets on the mesa-top within. At its heart stood the similarly circular structure of the Citadel, which the cultists had held now for the last three weeks.

Cultist activity within the other desert towns and Administratum centres had prevented the Imperial overlords of the planet from mounting an effective defence against the uprising. Black-robed Shinarii had emerged from their bandit country hideaways and from within the ranks of the servants of the Administratum and Munitorum on Herod itself to seize control of Antipax, the capital of the equatorial desert cities.

So now Assault Squad Dagan was making its attack descent on the centre of the cultists' operations, although this was not why the Iron Hands had come to the heretic-held world of Herod to begin with; the real reason rested with their sinister and secretive patron, Magos Omega Thule.

'Activate thrusters,' Dagan ordered over the squad comm.

With a turbine scream of jet-wash, Dagan's jump pack thrusters activated. A second later Brothers Accin, Tyur, Gamen, Csarte and Sered activated theirs.

For a moment the desert vista blurred, streaking away in a distortion of speed as the Iron Hands' pixelated heads-up display took a moment to compensate for the dramatic increase in velocity.

Dagan's bird's-eye view of the sandstone city showed it to be a maze of twisting streets, like an unearthed fossil within the expanse of the parched wilderness, criss-crossed by only a few featureless desert roads that connected it to other mineral trading centres across the equatorial band. The crystals yielded from the desert mountain mesas were used in the manufacture of las-weapons across the Achilles subsector.

The city filled his entire field of vision. From here he could even see the heretic-raised crucifixions lining the roads leading into Antipax.

And now he could see tiny figures moving within the chasm-like streets, and, more importantly, on the ramparts of the Citadel. Targeting icons flitted from one ant-like figure to another, as Dagan's suit cogita-tor assessed the threat potential of each in turn, ready for the moment when he decided to fire. Dagan currently held his plasma pistol and deactivated chainsword close against his chestplate, for the duration of the descent,

almost as if in an attitude of prayer. The rest of his squad were similarly armed although the other Space Marines bore bolt pistols.

This combination of powerful side arms and scything close-combat weapons gave the assault squad great flexibility. They could fire whilst still at a distance and yet also meet any opponent in close combat immediately upon entering the fray, dropping right into the heart of a conflict thanks to their jump packs, as they planned to do here.

The wind rushed past Dagan, the comms system in his helmet relaying the sound to him as clearly as if he were not wearing his helmet at all. The *whiz-crack* of shellfire detonated in the air around him, and whistled over the roar of the rushing wind. They had been spotted. The Shinarii on the roof of the Citadel had opened fire upon them.

'Brothers.' Dagan said, 'in the name of the Light-Bringer, Ferrus Manus, prepare to purge the weak and the unclean from this palace of the Emperor's servants.'

Each man took aim with his pistol and activated his chainsword. As Dagan thumbed the activation stud on his own sword he cast up a prayer to the Omnissiah and the spirits of his wargear, that they might not withdraw their favour from him at this time of battle.

Tanned faces, with blasphemous passages of anti-Imperial creed tattooed onto their exposed skin, looked up with a mixture of anger and horror, as the Space Marines twisted in the air, preparing to land feet first.

Thirty seconds after disembarking from the Thunderhawk, two thousand metres above Antipax, Assault Squad Dagan touched down on the battlements of the Citadel - within the very heart of the Shinarii cult's operations - in a furious outpouring of the Emperor's divine retribution.

Dagan landed directly on top of a black-swathed cultist who was taking poorly aimed pot shots at the Iron Hands' sergeant with a lasgun of antiquated design. As he crushed the insurrectionist's skull Dagan was already firing into the feral pack of fanatical Shinarii hurrying to repel the assault squad's siege-breaking insertion attack. The chest of another cultist exploded in a red spray even as Dagan gutted a charging scimitar-wielding maniac from neck to groin with one chewing swipe of his chainsword.

The veteran sergeant heard a shrill ululating cry rise above the cacophonous roar of the battle raging on the ramparts. Another of the black-clothed Shinarii was charging towards him out of the tumult. The desert wind that was also assaulting the Citadel's battlements whipped at

the cultist's flapping robes. Suddenly Dagan saw that the madman was carrying an antique-looking grenade. As the sergeant watched, the cultist screamed an oath of defiance and ripped out the cord, arming the grenade. But instead of throwing the bomb, the cultist continued to race forward towards the Space Marines' position.

If Dagan fired now the blast would detonate grenade and like as not blow him, his squad, as well as the rest of the cultists, into oblivion. If he did nothing the same thing would happen anyway: it would be as the cultist's ruinous masters demanded, no doubt.

Sergeant Dagan leapt forward through the throng on the battlements and grabbed the screaming Shinarii. With one deft, effortless movement, the Iron Hand hurled the man over the precipice of the battlements. A second later the grenade detonated, as the cultist plummeted down the side of the Citadel, the resulting explosion taking out a gun emplacement as well as vaporising the suicidal Chaos-lover. The explosion shook the battlements but the assault squad stood firm as their enemy stumbled and fell.

Yelling catechisms from the Scriptorium of Iron, the Space Marines sprayed the usurping Citadel-defenders with bolt pistol fire. The Shinarii died screaming.

There was a brief respite from the clamour of battle during which Dagan became aware of the conflict now raging on the streets of the city below as the rest of Iron-Father Gdolk's rescue force delivered the Emperor's justice to the Chaos rebels.

Dagan looked around him, taking in the battle-mented roof of the Citadel. Cultists lay dead all around him, the flapping of their wind-worried robes making their corpses look like carrion birds. A dark portal invited him inside the Citadel, to the very heart of the Shinarii cult's operation on the planet. The darkness promised to be a haven of cool compared to the harsh brilliance of the unforgiving suns-light. He did not need to be invited twice.

Revving the blade of his gore-wetted chainsword, Veteran Sergeant Dagan led the other Iron Hands of the assault squad into the darkness.

PISTOLS FIRING AND chain-blades whirling, the Assault Marines burst into what Sergeant Dagan guessed must once have been the Governor's apartments. The walls of the once lavishly decorated chambers were

covered in blasphemous graffiti, daubed in a liquid that had dried the colour of rust, and all the opulent furnishings, marble statuary and mosaic floors had been defaced by the iconoclastic actions of the Shinarii.

The fools, Dagan thought, to have no respect for the Imperium that had given them so much. It would be a pleasure purging their presence from this place.

A blast from his plasma pistol burnt the flesh from the face of a black-robed Shinarii devotee, hurling his body backwards so that the spiked mace he had been wielding above his head fell backwards onto the skull of the madman following him. Another six sabre-waving cultists fell to the bolter fire of the rest of the squad.

They were almost there. Soon the entire Citadel would be cleansed of the Shinarii's obscene presence and the slow process of re-consecrating it to the service of the Emperor could be begun: it would take an army of Imperial priests months to complete the work that would be required, such was the scale of the desecration.

A lance of white-hot pain drove through Dagan's brain, blinding him and making him cry out in pain. Unable to help himself he crumpled to his knees. He was dimly aware of another of his battle-brothers moving towards him to offer assistance. Then that Space Marine was on his knees too, crying out in pain.

Dagan tried to stand but simply raising his head made him feel dizzy and sick. He realised that blood was running from his nose, inside his helmet. He forced himself to open his eyes, ready to confront whatever it was that was determined to bring about his end.

Gliding into the chamber was another black-robed cultist creature - for creature it was to Dagan's mind, for how could something like this be considered human? The cultist was stripped to the waist, chains binding its torso. The symbol of an eight-pointed star was carved into the visible flesh beneath. The creature was completely hairless, the frontal lobes of its brain having grown in such a distorted manner that the cultist's whole skull had been swollen out of shape.

Its pupilless eyes shone with an intense white inner light and an aura of coruscating energy enclosed its entire body. Dagan could feel the static charge prickling on his skin. The creature was levitating a full half metre above the floor of the chamber.

'Greetings, noble warrior,' the blasphemy cackled.

A witch-cultist, Dagan realised, a rogue psyker. They were the bane of the Imperium and the chosen prey of the Ordo Hereticus. Without the powers of the psyker the vast Imperium of Mankind would be as nothing, unable to send messages or ships across the immeasurable vastness of space. But the untrained psyker's mind was something that could ultimately bring about the Imperium's destruction.

He had to destroy it, now, while he still could.

A second stab of mental pain, like the agonised death-scream of a thousand dying penitents, burst inside his skull. The hulking Space Marine doubled up and vomited across the shattered mosaic floor before him. He could hear the witch-creature still giggling inanely as it drifted closer, accompanied by the whimpering of his mind-tortured brethren.

Then the sickening laughter stopped abruptly.

Through bleeding eyes Sergeant Dagan saw a gigantic blue figure striding across the room towards him. He heard the psyker scream something in a language that he didn't understand, as blood spurted from its eye-sockets. And then the creature's head exploded, and Dagan blacked out.

IN THEIR ASSAULT on Antipax and the Citadel, Iron-Father Gdolkin had not lost one of his men. The worst injury any of his warriors had sustained was the mind-flaying at the hands of the Shinarii rogue psyker, and Sergeant Dagan and his men were already beginning to recover from the ordeal, thanks to the ministrations of Librarian Melchor.

With their hold on the Citadel broken, the remaining pockets of Shinarii resistance had been rooted out and put down quickly and effectively by the Iron Hands and the Governor's PDF troopers.

Within a matter of days the situation was returning to normal. But now they were tied up in a cycle of recriminations and backstabbing squabbles, petty blame-passing and excuse-making, which frustrated Gdolkin. He was a man of action, not of words. And besides, it was clear to him where the blame lay. It was a Planetary Governor's responsibility to see that the world entrusted to his care and supervision was policed and governed appropriately. For a cult like the Shinarii to gain such a strong foothold, being able to threaten the security of Herod in its entirety, Governor Sardis had failed in his duty to the Emperor and should pay the price accordingly.

But the organisations that made up the Imperium were as much subject to the wily manoeuvrings of politics as they were bastions of strength, valour, honour and retributive vengeance; as much affected by the political wranglings as they were the whims of Chaos or the predation of xenos races.

Governor Thaslos Hellek Sardis was weak, and if it had been Gdolkin's place to sit in judgement over the man who had allowed such an uprising to occur effectively unchallenged, he would have executed him there and then. But to do so would only serve to destabilise the political situation on Herod still further. He had been lucky to escape the crucifixions, considering how many other members of the government bodies based in Antipas had been victims of the cultists' cruel executions.

The rule of the Imperium on Herod had to continue, and it had to be *seen* to continue by the populace at large. The old regime had to be restored, else anarchy and confusion would like as not persist and Chaos would doubtless regain its foothold on this contested world. Since the Governor himself had played no part in the Shinarii uprising, his position had to be restored, at least for the time being. Had a member of His Holy Majesty's Inquisition been present, from the shadowy Ordo Hereticus perhaps, things might have gone very differently for the Governor. For them the ends always justified the means, no matter what anarchy might come to pass for those very ends to be achieved.

GOVERNOR SARDIS CLEARED his throat noisily, with a loud rasping cough. The sound echoed from the bare plaster walls of the temporary audience chamber, buried deep within the bowels of the recaptured Citadel. He was a grotesquely fat man with a wobbling chin and a bristly grey moustache cascading from his thin top lip. He also favoured the voluminous robes and exotic head-dress worn by the desert nomad traders.

'I must thank you, Iron-Father,' he said.

'You have Sergeant Dagan and his men to thank,' Gdolkin said grimly. 'But if you had been more exacting in your governorship of this world you would not have needed our help at all. It was your own lack of vigilance that allowed the Shinarii cult to flourish.'

For a taut moment the audience chamber was held in the grip of a tense silence.

Governor Sardis cleared his throat again.

'But your men quelled the rebellion so swiftly,' he persisted. Sardis seemed to think that at this time of turmoil, and with his own position so fragile, his best course of action was to keep praising the Space Marines and so ensure his own safety. He was a weak man indeed, and naive; flattery would get him nowhere with the Iron Hands.

'It was a simple surgical strike. Brother-Sergeant Dagan's kill-team's assault on the Citadel tore out the heart of the cult's strength. Kill the correct cell and the whole body dies.'

Knocking out the centre of the Shinarii's power base on Herod had been like ripping the heart out of a rabid animal, the rest of its body had died along with it; the insurrection had ultimately failed. The Iron Hands' attack had given the rest of the Planetary Defence Force the opening they had needed. In the space of thirty-six hours standard, Imperial forces had been able to take back control of Herod.

'But I don't believe you have,' said a voice as cold as frozen steel. It was accompanied by the sound of cloth dragging on the floor of the chamber. Magos Thule had arrived.

'What?' Gdolkin snarled.

'You haven't taken out the heart of the heretic cult,' the tech-priest said icily.

'You mean this *wasn't* the centre of the cult's operations?' Gdolkin growled, turning on the magos.

'I don't believe so, no.' Thule said, an insipid sneer creasing his thin lips.

'And on what basis do you make such an assumption?' Governor Sardis challenged.

'I do not think that you of all people, are in a position to question my reasoning.' Thule said, giving the Governor, who had come under close scrutiny following the quelling of the Shinarii revolt, a venomous look. 'And besides, it is no assumption.'

'Always so secretive.' Gdolkin muttered. 'What do you mean, magos? How do you know?'

'Because it is my belief that we want the same thing as the Shinarii do.'

'We do?' the Iron-Father said, somewhat taken aback. How could the loyal servants of the Imperium possibly want something that the minions of the Dark Powers also craved? 'Explain.'

'I feel that you are missing the point here,' the magos said, his condescending tone starting to irritate Gdolkin. 'The crux of the matter centres on the Bei'bul Stone.'

'The Bei'bul Stone?' Governor Sardis said from his throne. 'But that is surely just a legend, told by the nomad crystal-traders.'

'Oh, it is much more than that.' Thule said, a spark glinting in his organic eye. 'Certain agents of mine have been aware of the presence of an artefact, of unknown origin, existing on Herod for some time, but its true purpose has only begun to make sense in recent months, with the rise of the Despoiler's thirteenth Black Crusade and with the outbreak of war across the systems around the Cadian Gate.'

'What is this artefact you speak of?' the Iron-Father asked, intrigued despite himself.

'It is known as the Bei'bul Stone on this world.'

'And what is it, exactly?'

'Exactly? I am not sure.'

'You are not sure?' Gdolkin said, incredulously, anger building in his voice. 'Then why have my Iron Hands and I abandoned our homeworld at the time of its direct need to help you find it?'

'The security of the Imperium could rest on the success of this very mission! If we fail, then the Despoiler's crusade could very well swallow up every system that borders on the Eye of Terror. And then where would your precious homeworld be?'

'Then what is so important about this Bei'bul Stone?' the Iron Hands' commander railed.

'Again... I am not yet certain, which is why it is so urgent that we locate the artefact.' Thule persisted before the indignant Gdolkin could interrupt again, 'and as soon as possible. My agents had already located another of these Araken artefacts on Fornax Orbis Majoris, but it was destroyed by Ordinatus *Gehenna* before it could be studied, as you know.' The tech-priest went on, resentful bitterness clear in his voice. 'And that artefact had been the focus of the Plague God's forces on that blighted world. You are already aware of what happened as a result of its destruction.'

'So, as the artefact on the forge world drew the plague forces to it, you believe the same is true here on Herod. And since such an artefact hasn't

yet been found here, then wherever it is located, there we will find the focus of the Shinarii cult.'

'Precisely.' Magos Thule said flexing his needle digits. 'Whatever the Chaos-lovers intended to happen on this world, it has yet to come to fruition.'

'How can you be certain?' Governor Sardis asked.

'If they *had* completed whatever it was they intended to achieve here I believe we would all know about it by now... Governor,' Gdolkin said dismissively. The man was a fool; everything he said merely confirmed the Iron-Father's original impression of him.

'Therefore it is vital that we too find the artefact as quickly as possible.'

'One thing, magos,' Gdolkin said. 'If you have always known about the presence of this artefact, why were we not directed to attack its location in our initial strike?'

'Because it is only since the Shinarii's hold on Antipax was broken that I have been able to make contact with my agent and... extract the necessary information.'

'So let me make sure that I have this correctly now,' Gdolkin said pacing the chamber in front of the Governor's throne, Sardis excluded or forgotten now as the Iron-Father and Machine Cult magos debated the future of Herod. 'You have deduced that the heart of the heretic cult is focused now around the artefact - Araken artefact, was it? - on this world and that the Shinarii intend to enact some blasphemous rite, as the plague-servants did on Fornax?'

'Correct,' Thule said confidently.

'And your agents have now... revealed... its location to you?'

'Correct.'

'Then why are we not simply making a pre-emptive strike on the target from orbit, with the *Ajax's* laser lances?' The Iron-Father's voice was more a snarl of anger.

'By the Omnissiah!' Thule exclaimed. 'I would have thought that would have been obvious after what happened on sacred Fornax. You were there, weren't you? Because we do not want to destroy the Araken artefact on this world.'

'We don't?'

'No, we do not! I need to study it. It is the last remaining such artefact.'

'The last?'

'It is vital that we reach it as quickly as possible.'

'And where is this artefact? Where is it exactly that we have to get to?'

'It is no more than three hours' flight from here, assuming you travel by Thunderhawk,' the magos said.

A tense silence hung over the audience chamber.

Iron-Father Gdolkín had entered Governor Sardis's audience chamber believing that the greater threat that had brought such peril to Herod had all but passed, the loyal Planetary Defence Force troopers stationed on the planet capable of clearing up any last cells of stubborn resistance, and yet now the itinerant tech-priest was insisting that it hadn't.

'Well, Gdolkín? What are you waiting for?' It was Thule's turn to ask a question, his enquiry breaking the silence at last.

'We are waiting for you to reveal the location of this Chaos-damned Bei'bul Stone and hence, according to you, the whereabouts of the Shinarii cult.'

'I shall have the co-ordinates relayed to your craft without further delay.'

Iron-Father Gdolkín turned on his heel and strode from the audience chamber.

'Prepare the *Iron Eagle*,' Gdolkín addressed his men. 'We leave in ten minutes.'

EIGHT

WORD BEARER

THE CAVES OF BEI'BUL, THE MIDIAN DESERT, HEROD

THE IRON EAGLE touched down in front of the rugged, but otherwise featureless, face of the mesa, throwing up a great dust cloud around it. If any had been watching, then they would now know of the Iron Hands' arrival.

Gdolkin would have preferred to have had the Thunderhawk land further from their target and to have then continued on foot, demonstrating greater subterfuge. But according to Magos Thule there was no time for such an approach. They had to get as close to their target as quickly as possible. Gdolkin certainly didn't want to allow their prey to escape them and bring their blasphemous schemes to fruition.

Thule himself had not accompanied the Iron Hands for reasons of his own; Gdolkin speculated that the magos didn't want to be around if something went wrong. Though Thule was not with them in person, it could be said that he was with them in spirit. Bobbing through the air, behind the party of Space Marines were three servo-skulls; Thule's representatives as it were.

The fact that the tech-priest had elected to remain behind in Antipax angered Gdolkin, especially after the fuss he had made about them tracking down the Bei'bul Stone in the first place. To his mind, it demonstrated quite clearly how the magos thought of the Iron Hands: they were expendable, whereas he patently was not. The tech-priest's death would spell failure for the entire mission - whatever that really was. For even now the Iron-Father did not feel he really understood the real reason behind Thule's motives. There was more to it than the study of archeotech artefacts, of that he was certain.

First out of the Thunderhawk were the brothers of Tactical Squad Erastus: Fundare, Taudis, Naltech, Zorian and the veteran sergeant himself covering the rest of the Iron Hands' exit from the *Iron Eagle*. Their

scanning visor augurs and sweeping guns did not detect any of the enemy. In fact they detected nothing living out in this stretch of wilderness at all.

Iron-Father Gdolkin emerged from the dark belly of the Thunderhawk, his two remaining gun-servitor bodyguards behind him, and got his first proper look at the mesa. On the three-hour flight from Antipax, Gdolkin had seen what the pilot-servitor had seen, the view through the armaglass of the windshield relayed to his own visor display via the augury monitors of the Thunderhawk. In this way, he had seen the mesa quite clearly during the approach, the plateau's sheer sides rising from the flat plain of the desert wilderness as if it had grown up out of the surrounding sands, like one of the crystalline formations that were found buried beneath the shifting surface of this world and that were then employed in the manufacture of the standard issue Imperial Guard lasgun across this subsector.

The precipitous edge of the mesa described a scrawling line across the desert, making it look like the rugged coastline of an island amidst the seemingly endless seas of sand. But now the Iron-Father stood on the ground in front of this massive natural feature, and was not looking down on it from two thousand metres above, he felt truly dwarfed by its towering walls and the natural majesty of the simplicity of its form. To left and right the retreating edges of the cliffs continued for as far as Gdolkin could see, even with his biologically and mechanically-augmented eyesight. It was more impressive than any cathedral dedicated to the Machine God he had ever seen. He could understand why it was so venerated by the Shinarii and why it had become the dark temple of their accursed blasphemous faith.

The crenellated rock of the mesa's cliff sides rose a full five hundred metres above the desert, Gdolkin's visor readout told him. The sky above was pale gold suffused with near white, and the leader of the Iron Hands could see the boiling heat-haze cooking off the tabletop of the mesa. The twin suns of Herod blazed almost white in the burning sky. And yet the desert wind that whipped across the lifeless plain, sending mica particles skittering from the ceramite surface of Gdolkin's power armour and dusting the sand into the workings of his exposed bionic augmetics, was surprisingly cool.

It did not look as if anyone had ever been here, but then that was hardly surprising considering the harsh, inhospitable nature of the desert climate.

There were no signs of human habitation, not even the temporary tented structures of Herod's nomadic populace. No abandoned excavator machines, no tumbled ruins. Nothing.

It was just the kind of place guerrilla fighters, like those who had risen en masse against the government of the planet, would make the base of their operations.

Directly in front of the Iron Hands, a fissure split the strata of the cliff wall, black like a necrotising blade wound. According to Magos Thule, beyond that cleft in the cliff wall there was a complex of tunnels, galleries and caverns, at the very centre of which lay the ancient artefact known as the Bei'bul Stone.

One of the magos's three servo-skulls buzzed forward and Thule's voice addressed Gdolkin from the vox-speaker fixed between the skull's jaws. 'Hurry, Iron-Father. There is no time to lose now that we are here.'

'*We,*' Gdolkin grumbled.

Thule, or some other tech-priest artificer, had engineered it so that when Thule spoke through the skull its jaws clacked open and closed in time with his words. Gdolkin could not understand the purpose of such a conceit. Maybe it had been intended to unsettle any who witnessed it and impose the authority of the Adeptus Medanicus still further. But to Gdolkin's mind it was merely annoying; if he had possessed anything remotely approaching a sense of humour he might have found it vaguely ridiculous and amusing.

With the last of the squads disembarking from the Thunderhawk, jogging down the exit ramp at double quick time, their clumping steps ringing on the metal of the exit ramp, Gdolkin signalled his warriors forward.

THE AIR INSIDE the caves was cooler than that of the desert-blown wind outside. Gdolkin scoped the gallery ahead of his party. The cleft in the rock had risen to a height of a hundred metres once the Iron Hands had passed through the vertical split entrance to the cave network, and expanded quite considerably from a narrow passageway wide enough to let three Marines pass side by side, to a sandy-floored passageway twenty-five metres across.

There was a curious quality to the light in the caves. Having passed through the initial gloom of the entrance to the cavern complex the

ambient light had actually brightened. Not that it mattered to the Space Marines in terms of being able to see, their ocular enhancements, both augmetic and bio-engineered, meant that they could see in virtually total darkness.

However, the strangely bright luminescence unsettled the Iron Hands for they could not detect where it was coming from. Did the rocks here have some translucent quality that allowed the light of Herod's furious suns to somehow penetrate the caverns? Was it created by crystal formations within the rock, or could it even be the result of some archeolithic engineering?

Whatever the source of the illumination might be, its existence only served to bolster the Space Marines' belief that whatever the Shinarii's interest in the Bei'bul Stone might be, it could only mean ill for them, for Herod and for the Imperium at large.

Gdolkin's aural receptors were picking up a sound that was barely registering on the decibel scale, but as the Iron Hands advanced further into the cavern complex it became steadily more discernable.

'What is that?' Brother Ibrus said, his suit having registered the sound now as well.

It was like a hypnotic throbbing hum. It was a resonant baritone, reverberating with its own subsonic, whale song rhythm. 'Chanting.' Gdolkin said grimly.

'Then that is the way we must proceed.' Thule's voice spoke through the servo-skull.

It appeared that the magos was correct after all in his judgement that time was not on the Iron Hands' side. Something was definitely afoot within this accursed place.

The tunnel wound its way on through the rock of the mesa-mountain, splitting into various different pathways, some blocked by rock falls, that delved deeper into the bedrock of the planet or rose as natural steps, higher into the mesa. The path the Iron I lands were following was uneven as well, but with nothing like the extremes of other divergent passageways leading away to other crystal-lit tunnels. But always the skull led them on, bobbing through the air urgently ahead of them.

'IRON-FATHER, OVER here.' Librarian Melchor called.

The blue-armoured giant and one of his command squad, Brother Reuban, were standing next to the wall of the tunnel. Reuban was in a crouched position, tracing something in the rock with a ceramite finger.

'What do you make of this, my lord?'

Gdolkin looked to where the Iron Hand was pointing. A series of carvings had been made the smooth sandstone wall of the passageway, about fifty centimetres above the floor. The carvings looked not unlike the geometric patterns of a cogitator circuit board, chiselled into the rock, all at the one height, with nodes of crystals protruding from the pattern at particular points, which were no doubt critical junctures.

'Interesting.' Gdolkin observed, economical with words as ever.

There was certainly more to these caves than at first appeared, much more. Who had hewn them from the mesa? Who had the skill to engineer the very structure of the rock? Why would they do such a thing? Were these caves the legacy of perverted xenos-science or antiquities dated from the dim and distant Dark Age of Technology?

'*Interesting, Iron-Father?*' Thule's voice chimed from the servo-skull as the levitating device swept in past the Iron Hands and started scanning the carvings with a pulsing red beam of laser light emitted from one electronic eye. 'This vindicates my theories utterly. Now you must hasten. Time is running out!'

Gdolkin turned his baleful red-eyed gaze on the buzzing servo-skull. For a moment he considered swatted the device away. Then it was flying away from him again, leading the way deeper into the caves.

'Hurry!' it piped.

A frown of irritability contorting Gdolkin's face, the Iron-Father led the way for the others to follow.

GDOLKIN LOOKED DOWN into the vast space of the cultist shrine. The Iron Hands had made their way to the heart of the cave network and found this, a vast natural gallery, practically the size and scale of an Ecclesiarchy cathedral. It was certainly much bigger than the council chamber aboard the *Weyland*. The whole colossal chamber was lit by the same otherworldly luminescence as the tunnels that the Space Marines had followed to reach it. Yet more tunnels and galleries led off from this vast hollow in the rock. The one thing that dominated the mammoth, echoing cavern was a gigantic obelisk of black rock rising from a smooth-sided pit

in the centre of the cave floor. This was no natural crystal formation. Gdolkin could see that the obelisk had eight sides, that appeared to be of the same dimensions - according to a brief scan carried out by his cogitator-linked artificial eye - and perfectly smooth. However, at the obelisk's tip where the sides angled in to a point, set into the surface of the stone was a glittering crystalline grid, similar to the patterns the Iron Hands had seen carved into the tunnel walls elsewhere within the labyrinthine network of caves. Surely they could not have formed naturally? In fact, these particular patterns looked even more like the electronic tattoos worn under the skin by certain members of the Cult Mechanicus.

So this was the Bei'bul Stone.

Gdolkin judged the obelisk to stand fifty metres tall. It would have taken two squads to circle it. The blackness of the rock was in stark contrast to the yellow of the sandstone, and it did not reflect any of the light shining effusely within the cavern. It looked as if the massive monolith had in fact been excavated from the pit in which it now sat.

And it was this octahedral obelisk that had made the cavernous chamber a shrine, certainly; it was the reason why the cultists had congregated at this place. And what Gdolkin took to be the last of the Shinarii were gathered there now, still numbering around two hundred, the Iron-Father estimated. The black-robed cultists were prostrating themselves before the towering monolith, offering obeisance as they chanted in the dark tongue of their creed.

Gdolkin could not understand the words they were intoning, thank the Emperor, it was just a meaningless babble to his ears. But that did not mean that he could not understand its purpose. The Iron-Father could sense fell powers at work here, within this place, although whether the rite was intended to activate the artefact or destroy it, there was no way of knowing - at least not yet. The acoustics of the cave made the chanting rebound and redouble, lending it a throbbing quality that passed through Gdolkin. It made his ears itch to hear it and his stomach knot with the feeling of nausea.

The Iron Hands had scrambled up a steep incline, the sound of the chanting becoming clearer and louder with every step, until they had emerged onto a naturally formed ledge, a pillar of element-sculpted rock partially obscuring the position so that the Space Marines could look down

on the cavernous chamber that opened up before them without being seen by those already inside. They had encountered no opposition, no sentries or early warning systems. Obviously the Shinarii were either complacent about their position or the ritual occurring now before his eyes was of such importance that all their attention was focused on that and that alone.

'Finally, the last of the Araken artefacts!' Magos Thule's voice hissed.

'Silence, priest!' Gdolkin snapped back under his breath, over the vox. 'Would you give our position away?'

'But I must take readings from it, before it is too late.'

'What we must do is destroy that thing and bring about an end to the ritual before these cultists can bring harm to this world—'

Gdolkin broke off in mid-sentence as his finely-tuned ocular implant saw something else enter its field of vision, something that suddenly made what they had seen so far make more sense and yet which also impressed upon him the seriousness of their situation.

The other Iron Hands glanced at their leader, wondering what had caused him to break off so abruptly. All were impelled to look to where he was gazing, so intent was his stare.

An armoured figure, as tall as a Space Marine, was approaching the edge of the obelisk pit through the throng of bowing cultists. He was accompanied by a squad of seven other warriors. All were clad in the same manner, baroque suits of power armour, the colour of dried gore, the leader's trimmed with bone. The blasphemous markings etched into the surface of the ceramite plates and the curling, ridged horns rising from their altered helms spoke of their vile allegiance.

Their demagogue's armour was embellished with burning braziers rising from his suit's reactor pack. Draped across the giant's shoulders was the white and black-striped pelt of some feline, sabre-toothed predator. Chains hung rattling from his ceramited body, black metal icons dangling from them, along with the shrunken heads of the faithless. In his hand he bore a Chaos-consecrated mace and Gdolkin could see a snarling daemon face standing proud of the warrior-mystic's right shoulder plate.

These blasphemies were chanting too, as they strode through the crowd of the devoted faithful, their voices rich and powerful. Scraps of parchment fluttered from where they had been attached to their armour.

These figures exuded evil and power. All within the chamber were cowed by their mere presence: even Iron-Father Gdolkin could feel their

malign, dominating influence. It was the power that only an unswerving devotion to one's god could bring, representative of a faith that could bring entire worlds under its sway.

But in the case of these armoured behemoths, and in particular their icon-bearing leader, it was not their faith in the Emperor that gave them such presence, but an unswerving loyalty to the one force that threatened to topple the Imperium and all it stood for, a devotion to the sentient manifestation of all-encompassing evil, the power of Chaos undivided.

For before Gdolkon now were the evangelical foot-soldiers of Chaos in all its myriad forms coalesced as one unstoppable force - almost unstoppable, the Iron-Father had to remind himself - the offspring of the favoured Son of Chaos, the clerics of Colchis, the warriors of the Word. Daemons in human form. Chaos Marines. The Bearers of the Word.

And leading them was their own demagogue of evil, the driving force behind this whole operation - who had no doubt brought all of this about, who had seeded the cult of the Shinarii on this world countless centuries past, all in preparation for this moment - their Dark Apostle.

'Word Bearers,' Gdolkon spat, as if the very name were poison to him.

Seven warriors and their leader, eight in total: the number sacred to the Dark Gods they paid fealty to. The creatures emanated an aura of evil that the loyal brethren of the Iron Hands could feel coming off them in sickening pulsing waves. A miasma of malevolent intent, just a glimmer of the power that would see the universe overturned.

'Sons of Medusa.' Gdolkon intoned, 'prepare for battle.'

The Iron-Father hefted his blessed power axe in his right hand and raised the bolt pistol held in his left, casting up prayers to the Omnissiah that the machine spirits of his wargear might serve him well against the servants of Chaos in the battle to come.

Gdolkon felt waves of power emanating from the eight-sided obelisk. He could also sense a sick, oppressive force pulsing within the chamber, no doubt corrupting, insidious warp energy generated by the Shinarii's profane ritual.

'Brother Braxus,' the Iron-Father said, addressing the sergeant commanding the Iron Hands' Devastator squad, 'give the blasphemers a taste of the Emperor's most righteous wrath.'

Hit first and hit hard - that was the only way to deal with the enemy in this situation.

Gol Braxus and the rest of his squad spread out along the ledge, taking aim at the Word Bearers now standing in front of the obelisk. Braxus's missile launcher was loaded and ready. He pressed his finger lightly to the runed activation stud on the barrel of the weapon.

'Ommissiah guide thy flight,' he muttered to the missile resting inside the launcher.

'Stop!' Magos Thule screamed from the skull jerking fitfully next to Gdolkin. 'You must not damage the artefact!'

If it had not been for the chanting roar filling the chamber already the tech-priest's scream would have probably alerted all those present to the presence of the Iron Hands.

'Red Mars! Belay that order.' Gdolkin said with a sigh of exasperation. The Iron-Father turned to his men. 'It looks like we are going to have to get our hands dirty.'

A buzzing hum passed by Gdolkin's head and he looked up for a moment to see the three servo-skulls flying towards the octahedral obelisk at the centre of the chamber.

'Warp damn that magos!' the Iron-Father hissed, his servo-arm snapping in irritation.

Either Magos Thule had not seen what the Iron Hands had, through the electronic sensor eyes of the servo-skulls, or he did not understand how dire it meant the situation had suddenly become. Or perhaps he simply didn't care, so driven was he to uncover the secrets of the Araken artefact.

In a moment their position would be given away, Gdolkin realised with mounting dread, anger rising within him. Better that they reveal themselves now while they at least still had the element of surprise on their side.

'Warriors of iron!' he yelled, leaping to his feet. 'In the names of the Emperor, the primarch and the Ommissiah, purge the evil from this place!'

With that, his bolt pistol hurling shells into the assembled crowd of cultists, and his power axe crackling with esoteric energies, Gdolkin hurled himself off the ledge and down into the startled throng below.

GDOLKIN'S BOLT PISTOL coughed in his hand, the bionics in his wrist meaning that he barely even registered the recoil that could have broken a normal man's arm. The tattooed face of the ravening cultist burst like an

overripe ripe watermelon. The black-swathed body crumpled and Gdolkin fired another volley of bolter shells into the line of cultists beyond.

But the cultists behind kept pushing forwards, knives, sabres and firearms produced from within the swathes of their robes, and in a moment the press of bodies was upon the Space Marines. Gdolkin had judged there to be somewhere around two hundred cultists present in the shrine, all madmen willing to die for their unholy masters, and eight daemon-souled creatures, against the Iron Hands' twenty-nine noble brothers and Gdolkin's two remaining servitor bodyguards.

Gdolkin and the rest of his force would have to fight their way through the insanely fanatical Shinarii in order to get to their Traitor Marine overlords.

Word Bearers. The corrupted spawn of the Chaos-cursed gene-seed of their traitorous Primarch Lorgar. In many ways they were the most fiercely zealous of all the Traitor Legions who followed the Despoiler in his Black Crusade to overthrow the rule of the Emperor. Ten thousand years ago, before one of the darkest times in the history of the Imperium, that of the Horus Heresy - when the Emperor's most trusted son turned on his father, along with half the Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes First Founding Legions - they and their primarch had been fanatical devotees of the Imperial cult. But now they worshipped the Fell Powers that gnawed at the bones of reality, whose desire, and indeed need, for worship outstripped that of the Emperor. The Word Bearers had dedicated themselves, body and soul, to the power of Chaos, in its purest, darkest, most inhumanly evil form.

Gdolkin fixed his eyes on the Dark Apostle and felt fire burn within his heart, as hot as the fires burning in the braziers that cast flickering orange shadows across the Word Bearer's face, giving him a daemonic appearance. That the warped creature should attempt an act of such blatant Chaos-inspired blasphemy on one of His Imperial Majesty's sovereign worlds, and right in front of the Omnissiah's most blessed Iron Hands, was an outrage!

And now this vile servant of Chaos dared to continue his foul rite in front of their very eyes. As the Iron Hands commenced their assault on the cultist throng, the Word Bearers too were distracted for a moment, surprised by the presence of the Space Marines, although their demagogue would not be stopped so readily.

Such was the fear and awe that the Chaplain of the Word Bearers inspired in the Shinarii that the invocation continued, cultists possessed of a fanatical hysteria shouting the twisted words of their evil litany even as they came at the valiant Iron Hands.

The Traitor Marines encircled the obelisk, protecting their Dark Apostle, so that he might complete whatever blasphemous rite he had set in motion.

The Word Bearers' Chaplain was surrounded by a shadowy miasma that writhed with unnatural life. The darkness shrouding the Traitor Marine seemed to be seeping out of the very fabric of reality around him. Evil of unfathomable malevolent intent was undoubtedly at work.

Thule's servo-skulls were buzzing around the structure of the obelisk in erratic spirals, carrying out scans of the artefact whilst trying to avoid the attentions of the Word Bearers, sensors keeping them alert to the actions of the Chaos Marines below. But it was not enough. There was the rattling roar of ancient wargear and the three servitors were blown to smithereens, pieces of bone and shrapnel landing at the feet of the advancing Iron Hands.

One of the devices crashed to the ground with a metallic thud next to the Iron-Father himself. The skull was charred and half of it was missing entirely. Wires and fragments of its grav-motor assembly hung down from the cranium like a severed spinal column. There was a buzz of crackling interference from the skull's vox and then Thule spoke to Gdolk in through the shattered mechanism.

'Stop th-zzz rit-fefcss!' The magos's voice sounded distant and distorted, speaking through the damaged servitor. 'You m-zzz stop fcfefcss-tual!'

'By the primarch! That much is obvious!' Gdolk in snarled, crushing the remains of the servo-skull beneath the heel of his boot.

There was a shrill scream away to his right and Gdolk in glimpsed Librarian Melchor immolate one of the Shinarii with an incandescent psychic bolt.

Gdolk in judged that he was a mere twenty metres from the raised edge of the obelisk pit now. But between him and his target was still the crashing press of the cultist host. His bolt pistol would not serve him well in this situation. He would have to resort to close combat fighting. Not that such a thing troubled the Iron-Father. Bringing the Emperor's justice to his

enemies hand-to-hand, face-to-face gave him a thrill of satisfaction like nothing else could.

Gdolkin waded in with the burning blue blade of his power axe cutting blazing figure of eight trails through the cultists' bodies. Bullets spanged from his hulking black-armoured body, or were deflected by the crackling force-field generated by his *Mechanicus Protectiva*, as some of those cultists bearing firearms attempted to gun down the advancing Iron Hands.

But simple shotgun shells had little effect against ceramite armour and augmented metal limbs anyway. The Space Marines simply shrugged off the cultists' gunfire.

Following their leader's example, and just as eager to mete out the Emperor's divine retribution against the Word Bearers, the rest of the Iron Hands were throwing themselves into the fray, making mincemeat of the last of the Shinarii. The black-robed cultists made little impression against the heavily armed and armoured Space Marines, and gave the Emperor's elite little effective opposition. But their great numbers and their zealous determination were still enough to prove an irritation to the Iron Hands, especially considering that time was rapidly running out. Iron-Brother Ibrus struck a flailing cultist hard across the back with his augmented right arm, hard enough to shatter the bones of the heretic's spine. The man fell forward, his back broken.

There was the *zing* and *whomph* of a plasma weapon firing and a pair of chainsword-swinging zealots were immolated as Brother Samson risked using his weapon in the midst of the battle for the obelisk. It had been a calculated risk worth taking.

Now that they were out in the open of the vaulted space of the chamber Gdolkin was aware of Sergeant Dagan's assault squad firing up their jump packs and taking to the air to make the gigantic leap necessary to put themselves into close combat with the Word Bearers' Marines.

Not two metres away another of the robed cultists went down as Brother Yergen, of Tactical Squad Vincien, continued his blooding, punching his gleaming silver left hand right through the chest of a Shinarii.

Gdolkin brought his axe across in a scything blow, the monomolecular edge of the disruption field-sheathed blade slicing through not one, or even two, but three sabre-wielding fanatics. Three more swift strokes turned them into just so many bundles of black cloth-wrapped body parts.

Behind him Joab XIII and Ishmael 192 continued to hold back the masses with blasts from their shoulder-mounted heavy weapons.

There was a flash of white to his left and Gdolkin glimpsed Apothecary Caduceus, his armoured form vividly bright amidst the dark robes of the Shinarii, do away with one of the Chaos devotees by plunging the spike of his progenoid-extracting reductor through the screaming maniac's eye so that it punched out the back of the man's skull, silencing his cries.

The Iron-Father launched himself at a group of Shinarii who were threatening to pull down the limping Brother Betorin, his bionic right leg still restricting his mobility following the damage it had suffered on the plague-cursed forge world. Gdolkin's blazing power axe did for one of the creatures, slicing his head off above the jaw. His bolt pistol stowed away, the Iron-Father pulled another man off Betorin, dislocating the cultist's shoulder as he did so. At the same time Gdolkin's servo-arm took hold of another grappling Shinarii and snapped his attacker's neck.

He was almost there; he was almost upon the Word Bearers. Gdolkin hefted his power axe in both hands, preparing to bring it down on the Dark Apostle in a scything sweep. Five steps - powerful leaping strides - no more, and he would be on top of the corrupt Chaplain.

But at that moment, the Word Bearer's demagogue completed whatever evil ritual he had been performing.

A crack like a thunderclap shook the cavern, knocking the Iron Hands as well as their assailants to the ground at a stroke - but that was only the beginning. The curious light that illuminated the caves began to fade.

Gdolkin scrambled to his feet, his eyes on the Dark Apostle. The blasphemer had his arms outstretched towards the obelisk, a bolt of blinding light streaming from his fingertips at the octahedral prism structure. As the light poured from the Apostle's hands the cloak of darkness shrouding his body burnt away. Where the stream of warp energy struck, the smooth glassy black surface of the stone pillar started to ripple and warp. The artefact began resonating, giving out throbbing waves of sound and kinetic energy. The ground began to shake in sympathy and then, with a granite cracking, chunks of rock started to come away from the dome of the cavern roof.

Gdolkin found himself staggering and stumbling to keep his balance. He could see that the Dark Apostle was shaking too but somehow kept rigidly upright, despite the waves of energy buffeting him.

He could still take the Apostle, Gdolkin thought. In four more bounding strides he could be on the heretic, cut him down and halt the ritual. But deep down, beneath the valorous intent, the Iron-Father suspected that he was too late and that the ritual had already reached its climax. However, he could still bring down the Word Bearer.

Iron-Father Gdolkin leapt forwards, his two servitor bodyguards only a few steps behind him.

A second thunderclap shook the chamber, louder than the first, flooring the Iron-Father and the other Iron Hands again. With an awful cracking sound the rock floor of the cavern split open as the tremors hit. Screaming cultists tumbled into the void, as did Brother Nerator with his heavy bolter and Brother Momech of Vincien's squad, before any of the other Space Marines could do anything to save them. The airborne assault Marines were hurled into the walls of the Tavern, pieces of fractured rock coming down around them.

Waves of energy, tinged a sickly green by the influence of the warp, were now pulsing from the wildly resonating obelisk: just like the waves of energy following the destruction of the target on Fornax Orbis Majoris by Ordinatus *Gehenna*.

There was only one possible course of action open to them now, Gdolkin realised. Whatever Magos Thule might believe, the Iron Hands were not expendable; they were the Emperor's finest. They would gladly give their lives for the Emperor, defending His mighty galaxy-spanning realm, but their deaths here and now would gain nothing. In fact, if they failed their quest, their deaths might even result in the Imperium paying a price it could ill afford as the Despoiler's armies ravaged all before it.

'Gdolkin to all units,' he shouted into the comm over the crashing roars of the collapsing cavern. 'Get out!' he bellowed.

A shard of sandstone as large as a Leman Russ struck the ground in front of Gdolkin tip first. With the slow, inevitable momentum of a falling tree, the rock began to topple over towards him. The Iron-Father flung himself to his right as the shard crashed down on the spot where he had been only moments before. The force field generated by his Mechanicus Protectiva fizzed and sparked as a stone ricocheted from the splintering shard.

The Iron Hands were responding as quickly as they could, flinging panicking cultists out of their way as the Shinarii fell victim to the

widening fissures in the rock and the falling sections of cave roof. The Space Marines were piling for the tunnel by which they had entered the artefact's resting place. Clouds of dust and sand gusted from the tunnel into the larger chamber. And then Brother Momech was with them. Somehow he had managed to extricate himself from the fissure. As they made their escape, Gdolkin looked back to the Word Bearer. Was he really intending on sacrificing himself to finish about whatever sacrilegious act had been begun here?

The Dark Apostle still stood before the vibrating black obelisk, only the Traitor Marine was no longer directing the flow of warp energy at the artefact. Instead, although the Iron-Father could barely believe what he was seeing, the Apostle's conjurations appeared to be opening a hole in the air in front of the pit. Incandescent beams of an unreal spectrum of light spilled into the darkening chamber. It was as if the Chaos creature had forced a tear in the very fabric of the universe. The aperture continued to expand until it was several metres across.

The Dark Apostle stepped towards the portal, then turned and looked directly at Gdolkin. The Iron-Father felt his stomach knot involuntarily in apprehension. By the primarch, he chastised himself, he had nothing to fear from one who had turned his back on the Emperor's light!

Another block of stone crashed down from the chamber roof, clipping the edge of the obelisk and obscuring Gdolkin's view. Then the Apostle was gone.

One day, as the God-Emperor is my witness, Gdolkin vowed, there will be such a reckoning between us that our encounter shall be spoken of by the Sons of Medusa in the centuries to come.

Gdolkin turned and followed his men as they made their escape from the cavernous cathedral space.

THE FIRST OF the Iron Hands, the warriors of Assault Squad Dagan, were only just emerging from the fissure in the mesa's side into the blinding light of noon when, at the heart of the cave complex behind them, the artefact detonated. The Space Marines heard and felt the blast like an underground atomic explosion.

'Get down!' Gdolkin yelled, anticipating what would happen next. 'Keep the rock behind you!'

The Iron Hands obeyed, Iron-Father Gdolkin and his two bodyguard slave-machines being the last to escape and throw themselves clear of the cave mouth.

The energy-wave of the artefact's apocalyptic destruction swept through the cave, reducing the remaining cultists' bodies to wind blown cinders. Barely two seconds after Gdolkin made it out of the caves, ripples of coruscating, emerald light blasted out of the fissure, battering the waiting *Iron Eagle*. The bombardment threatened to turn the craft over and the Thunderhawk's servitor-pilot was only able to hold its position by activating its thrusters. The eldritch warp blast continued out into the featureless desert beyond.

The Iron Hands watched as the Shockwave from the explosion passed through the bedrock of the planet, a rippling tidal wave of sand sweeping out across the wilderness.

But the tremors continued. With a crashing roar that was so loud it was almost too thundrous to even register on the human scale of hearing as anything more than the ringing tinnitus of white noise, a section of the mesa plateau collapsed inwards. The cliff-face above Iron-Father Gdolkin shook, great slabs of sandstone breaking loose and falling towards the Iron Hands in massive chunks. The Space Marines didn't need to be given the order to move.

'Into the *Iron Eagle*!' Gdolkin commanded.

The twenty-seven survivors of the artefact's destruction - Brother Zorian having been flattened beneath a falling slab of tunnel roof - piled into the Thunderhawk and as soon as they all were in, before the boarding ramp had even been raised, the *Iron Eagle* took off, before it too was crushed under the collapsing face of the mesa.

'What now, Iron-Father?' Gdolkin heard Brother Yergen ask over the comm.

'We head back to Antipax. I believe that Magos Thule will no longer have any reason to remain on Herod, now that the Bei'bul Stone has been destroyed.'

* * *

THE EARTHQUAKE LASTED for a total duration of three minutes thirty-three seconds. The tremors were felt even back in Antipax half a continent

away, but at the quake's epicentre the face of Herod was changed irrevocably, a massive sinkhole forty kilometres wide spreading out across the desert, to a depth of five hundred metres.

The effects of the Bei'bul Stone's destruction did not stop there. The rippling energy-wave of its detonation passed through the atmosphere, continuing out into space; onward, ever onward, unceasing.

Two hundred light years away, a million million leagues beyond the fringes of the Herod system, at the roiling rim of the Eye of Terror itself, something began to stir within the flickering blood-red nebula cloud of the spatial anomaly referred to as the Araken Anomaly.

Red-eyed Araken.

Raging Araken.

Warpstorm Araken.

ARAKEN

'The forces of warp space rage like the mightiest ocean, and if a mortal could perceive the sound of that realm, he would hear every noise in the universe voiced simultaneously, and would be driven utterly and profoundly insane by the experience.'

- **The heretic Elijah of Mephisto V**

NINE

GHOSTS OF THE WARP

IN HIGH ORBIT OVER HEROD

'COMMANDER ON THE bridge!' the yeoman of the watch announced in a strident bellow as Iron-Father Gdolkin strode into the command nave of the Iron Hands' strike cruiser *Ajax*, bodyguard-servitors Joab XIII and Ishmael 192 following two paces behind. There was the crashing ring of the Space Marines present coming to attention as the thrall-technicians and hard-wired servitors continued with their work about the bridge.

Gdolkin acknowledged Brother Lagan of the watch with a curt nod and then, before doing anything else, approached the bronze statue of the great primarch. Ferrus Manus's hands were plated silver, as was traditional with icons of the Chapter. Gdolkin made his obeisance, making the sign of the aquila over his chest as he did so. Then he rose and approached the main command pulpit of the bridge.

'As you were,' he said, and the Iron Hands went about their business again.

Hovering in front of the pulpit was the unmistakable form of Iron-Captain Strake, the true commander of the *Ajax*. He had been with the vessel since the Grailsword Campaign against the alien eldar one hundred and eleven years previously. At that time, however, he had still had his legs. It wasn't until three years later, when during its darkest hour the *Ajax* had been crippled and almost destroyed in battle against a tyranid hive-fleet, that Captain Strake had suffered appalling disabling injuries to match.

The whole of the left-hand side of his face was disfigured by bio-acid burns, giving it an almost skeletal appearance. This, married to the fact that the other half of his head was now made up of iron-plated augmentics, meant that Strake's face looked not unlike the Machina Opus cyborg-skull symbol of the mighty Adeptus Mechanicus.

As well as having his legs shorn off by a splinter of bone shrapnel from a tyranid spore mine, so great was the damage caused to his spine by the bio-acid that it would have been almost impossible to equip Strake with bionic legs. And besides, the itinerant captain did not feel that a pair of legs was the most practicable thing he needed as commander of an Astartes battleship. At his request techno-surgery had been performed to fit him with an anti-grav assembly, beneath his waist, not unlike those used in the manufacture of servo-skulls.

In Strake's mind the machine was the ideal, and if the physical was not good enough, why keep to the pattern set by inadequate biological forerunners? Whilst others were thrown about by shuddering impacts or the turbulence created by spatial anomalies, he was able to keep a clear grip on the situation, no longer in physical contact with the floor. No matter how much the *Ajax* might pitch or yaw he stayed forever upright.

Iron-Captain Strake certainly struck an imposing figure aboard the bridge of the strike cruiser, seeming more machine than man. He was a warrior Iron-Father Gdolkon had great respect for.

Behind Strake, Gdolkon could see the main view screen of the bridge, fully ten metres across and five high. It was currently displaying the view visible beyond the command turret of the *Ajax*.

The star field was tinged red by the flickering of a far distant nebula. In the bottom left-hand corner of the screen the yellow arc of Herod could be seen rotating lazily beneath the irradiating glare of its twin suns, currently astern of the *Ajax*.

Gdolkin remembered when he had seen the stars strewn the firmament above Medusa properly for the first time, and the awe and emotion that went with the experience. His homeworld was shrouded by dark clouds of pollution on an almost permanent basis and when there was a break in the billows, the view of the void beyond was so distorted by the chemical vapours, ever-present in the atmosphere, that the distant suns looked like blurred, discoloured smudges. The first time he had been aboard a Thunderhawk as it had breached the barrier of the planet's polluted atmosphere he had almost wept.

The only other objects visible of interest to Gdolkin were the prowed oblong shapes of the Tyrant-class cruiser *Cardinal Turin* and its escort squadron, seconded from Battlegroup Fortis, which had arrived after the Iron Hands had quelled the rebellion on the planet below. Commodore Foxx had apologised for their delay, citing that there had been a disturbance within the warp as his ships were making the jump back into real space. One had been lost and the others had found themselves several million kilometres off course, beyond the edge of the Herod system. The commodore had felt it too dangerous to re-enter the empyrean and so the squadron had completed its journey at sub-light speed, progressing more slowly through the relative safety of the void.

No such reinforcements had come to the aid of the heretic forces. But then it seemed that their task here was completed: there was no need to continue the fight in this arena. There were greater objectives for the Despoiler's armies to conquer elsewhere.

'It is good to have you back aboard, Iron-Father,' Strake proclaimed in the sonorous voice that he was renowned for, the booming tone at odds with the crippled body locked in its augmetic shell.

'It is good to be back.' Gdolkin admitted with uncharacteristic candour.

'For a moment there I doubted that anything could have survived such a destructive energy wave, particularly after what happened on forge world Fornax,' Strake said.

'You doubted?' Gdolkin challenged. 'Where was your faith in the primarch, brother-captain?'

'Where it has always been,' Strake growled, 'in my heart, in my mind, in my very soul. It is just that I have seen enough in my centuries of service to the Emperor to know that there are darker forces at work in this

universe - as should you, Gdolkin - that can change the course of events beyond our control, no matter how strong a warrior's faith might be.'

Their failure to see eye-to-eye rankled Gdolkin. Maybe his own faith in Strake had been misplaced? They were not of the same clan - that was more certain. The iron-captain had risen through the ranks of the Chapter from amongst the brethren of the Raukaan clan. Now, as commander of the *Ajax*, Strake served all Iron Hands' battle-brothers, no matter what clan they might have come from originally, carrying them wherever the call of war took them.

'Be careful, captain,' the Iron-Father snarled, 'what you say smacks of heresy, and heresy is weakness of the soul. And weakness—'

'Is the ultimate sin.' Strake interjected. 'I know, I have read the Scriptorium of Iron, Iron-Father. And I am no heretic! Doubt does not necessarily imply weakness. A healthy dose of scepticism can aid a commander in battle and help him win the day, in my experience.'

The atmosphere on the bridge had become very tense. None of the other Iron Hands dared speak. Such challenges between the more senior members of the Chapter were not uncommon, just as open conflict between the Iron Hands clans was a part of every day life of Medusa, and were another means by which the Chapter kept-itself free of complacency and internal corruption. However, they were also another example of just why it was so dangerous to leave the overall command of an Astartes Chapter in the hands of one Chapter Master. If that individual was flawed then the danger was that the whole Chapter could become flawed as a result.

Gdolkin took a deep breath to calm himself. 'How is the ship?' he asked grudgingly, doing his best to make relations more cordial between himself and the captain of the *Ajax*, so that they might progress their mission more effectively.

'We were more fortunate on this occasion. The Ommissiah was smiling upon our endeavours. Unlike on Fornax, we were not in the path of the dissipating warp energy-wave and so our systems were not knocked out by the blast. Our void shields remained at full strength and our surveyors remained one hundred per cent operational,' Strake explained. 'As a result, we were able to monitor what happened to the energy wave as it travelled out into space.'

'And what did happen? What did you discover?'

Strake had been studying the screen set into the lacquered mahogany top of his command pulpit when Gdolkin had entered the bridge. The *Ajax's* captain turned back to it now and was joined by the Iron-Father. The pict-display showed a projection of the edge of the roiling Eye of Terror, located to the galactic north-west. The detail was hard to pick out on such a small projection.

'What are you trying to show me, captain?' Gdolkin asked.

'Here, let me enlarge it for you.'

'Pulpit display to main screen,' Strake ordered. There was the electronic chirruping of a servitor and the clicking chant of a tech-adept, and then the image on the main view screen blipped out and was replaced a second later with the projection Strake had been studying.

Now that it was projected on a screen ten by five metres it was much clearer to Gdolkin and the other Iron Hands what they were being shown. Within the systems bordering the Eye the smudge of a crimson-clouded nebula could be seen. Such a thing was not uncommon around the warp-real space interface of the Ocularis Terribus.

'And this is...?'

'It is a spatial anomaly which according to the Imperial catalogue has been designated "Warpstorm Araken".'

'As in Magos Thule's Araken artefact?'

'Precisely.'

'So what does this have to do with the events on Herod?' Gdolkin asked, his interest piqued.

'Well, as you can see, this system lies a mere seven light years from the anomaly.' Strake said, drawing up the name "Herod" on the screen so that all present might clearly see what he already knew. 'After the destruction of the Araken artefact, the energy wave travelled out into the void, in the direction of the anomaly. Only a matter of hours after the destruction of the Bei'bul Stone, our augur-arrays detected a two hundredfold increase in activity within the warpstorm.'

'Two hundred-fold?' Gdolkin said in astonishment.

'Indeed. The Araken Anomaly has also increased in size by a factor of three. Whereas before it was approximately two light years across it has now tripled in size and is now six light years across. Not only that, but it is becoming less dense.'

'So it would appear that the destruction of the Bei'bul Stone had a direct effect on this warpstorm.' Gdolkín said, stragglíng to hide his disbelief.

'I believe so.'

'And could the annihilation of Thule's alleged artefact on Fornax Orbis Majoris have had an equal effect on the warpstorm?'

'I think it very likely.' Strake confirmed. 'Although the energy wave from the blast on the forge world knocked out our systems temporarily at the time, I have entreated the ship's central cogitator to extrapolate the course of that energy-wave and it too could have culminated at the anomaly.'

'By why? How? What do we know of Warpstorm Araken already?' The Iron-Father was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery.

'Very little. More myth and rumour than anything else. The Imperial record states that a greater than usual number of ships have disappeared within that area of space, but such a thing is not uncommon in the presence of a warpstorm. The resultant disturbance in the empyrean can cause Navigators to lose their way, ships to become lost on the tides of the Sea of Souls, be torn apart by the unnatural forces at work there, or to more readily fall foul of the denizens of that unreal universe.'

Gdolkín surveyed the image on the giant pict-screen in silence for a moment as he considered the implications of this discovery.

'So everything about our mission comes back to this anomaly, to Warpstorm Araken?' he sumised.

'It would seem so.'

'I wonder what the tech-priest would make of this?' Gdolkín mused. 'Has anyone seen the magos since we boarded?'

'He and his entourage returned to their quarters.' Strake informed the Iron-Father.

'Ah, yes, his entourage.'

The tech-priest had brought his not inconsiderable entourage aboard the *Ajax* on leaving Fornax and they resided even now within an adapted hold in the bowels of the vessel. As well as a small army of adepts and servitors created for every conceivable purpose, there was also a contingent of Mechanicus tech-guard soldiers, many requisitioned from the forge world of Fornax where - no matter how much Magos Ludd and the other Mechanicus representatives there might not have liked it - Grand Magos

Thule had certainly held some sway. His party had been swelled further on leaving Herod.

And this small tech-army was not resting idle down there in the hold. Thule's servants were preparing for something, slaving away every hour of the day, although Gdolkin and the other Iron Hands knew not to what end.

No one had seen or spoken to the magos since he had reboarded the *Ajax*. He had not had anything to say for himself as the Iron Hands left Herod but anger rose from him as a tangible aura.

'You said that activity within the warpstorm is increasing but that at the same time its density is decreasing.' Gdolkin said, coming back to the matter in hand.

'Yes. It would appear that the warpstorm is dissipating, that it is actually blowing itself out.' Strake verified. 'But that isn't all.'

'You have more revelations for me, Strake?'

Iron-Captain Strake keyed something into the pulpit console in front of him. A moment later the image on the screen homed in on the shape of the warpstorm. Gdolkin could see the tendrils of dust and ice particles streaming off the anomalous nebula, out into space. At the heart of the roiling mass the Iron-Father fancied that he could see the cold darkness of empty space appearing beyond the veil of the storm. Only it wasn't empty.

'What is that?' he said, pointing at the screen.

'You see it too then?' Strake said, a hint of satisfied vindication in his voice.

'There's something there, at the centre of the warpstorm.'

'Yes. A star system.'

For a moment, no one said anything. Then Gdolkin tried to make sense of it all.

'How can such a thing be happening? Can the destruction of the artefacts really have brought about the banishment of a warpstorm? How will this affect our mission now? And what impact does it have on the war that we are fighting? What does it have to do with the Despoiler's Black Crusade?'

'I too wish I had the answers to such questions.' Strake said. 'Then at least I might better know the course the *Ajax* is to be called to. Perhaps Magos Thule could shed some light on the matter.'

There was the familiar sound of heavy robes dragging on the floor of the bridge.

'Indeed I can.'

It was Magos Thule. He was accompanied by two shaven-headed adepts and a servitor skull, the metal proboscis projecting from where the drone's mandible should have been, giving it an insect-like aspect.

The Iron-Father was somewhat taken aback. The tech-priest's mood seemed much better than he had expected, considering how his mission to study the Araken artefacts had failed so completely. If anything, amidst the twists of scar tissue and augmetic enhancements of his face Thule seemed to be smiling.

'Then I think you should.' Gdolkin said, his voice like steel again. 'In fact, I think it is time you explained to us the true purpose of our mission.'

'Well met, magos.' Iron-Captain Strake said. He did not share the Iron-Father's experience and understanding of the itinerant tech-priest and, if anything, was slightly in awe of Omega Thule. At least, as long as the grand magos was on board his ship, he would show him the courtesy any captain - but particularly one of an Iron Hands' vessel - should offer a visiting dignitary.

'Captain.' Thule acknowledged, his manner as smooth as if he had been oiled.

'So, Thule, what else haven't you told us?' Gdolkin demanded.

'Yes, events have moved on somewhat further than I had expected or dared hope, following the debacle on Herod,' the tech-priest said enigmatically. 'At first, with the destruction of the last of the artefacts, I had thought that our mission was over, that what I had intended to discover had been lost to the Cult Mechanicus and the Imperium forever. But,' the magos paused, 'I was wrong.'

'You? You, were wrong?' Gdolkin's astonishment was further compounded hearing the tech-priest, who was always so certain of himself and so ready to put anybody else in their place, admit that he had made a mistake.

The magos shot the Iron-Father a glare of loathing.

'My servants and I have been carrying out our own studies of the warpstorm anomaly and the consequences of the enemy's actions upon it,' he said, making no response to the Iron-Father's comments. 'Captain Strake, if I could suggest that we retire to your strategium, I might expound... more fully on the matter.'

SIX ATTENDED THE meeting in Iron-Captain Strake's strategium chamber, off from the strike cruiser's bridge: Iron-Father Gdolkin, Brother-Librarian Melchor, at Gdolkin's behest, Magos Thule, attended by the twin adepts, and the hovering, cyborg commander of the *Ajax* himself. Thule's servo-skull was also present, but merely as an observer to the proceedings. The chamber was subtly lit and spartanly decorated. Other than a desk and a wall pict-viewer the only other item of note in Strake's ready room was a small glowcandle-lit shrine to the trinity of the Emperor, primarch and Omnissiah in one gloomy corner. Resting on the altar shelf, held in the grip of a bronze-cast gauntlet hand was a gleaming bolt pistol, its body and barrel inscribed with ensorcelled carvings depicting the triumph of Ferrus Mantis over the great silver wurm Asirnoth.

'Well, magos.' Strake said. 'We await your exposition.'

'Very good, captain. If I might make use of your pict-viewer?'

Gdolkin had never known the magos show such respect for another Iron Hand, whom he had obviously regarded as being beneath him before. After all, the Iron-Father's whole relief force and the *Ajax* had been put at his disposal by the great clan council on Medusa.

'Please.' Strake said, making a sweeping expansive gesture with one hand.

Thule approached the pict-viewer control console built into the captain's desk. As the magos stretched his hand out towards it, Gdolkin saw wire filaments emerge from the tips of the tech-priest's fingers and link up with connector sockets. The image the Iron-Father had seen displayed on the bridge view screen faded into crisp resolution here too.

'This, as I believe you already know,' the tech-priest said, 'is the Araken Anomaly. Ever since the last of the artefacts - the Bei'bul Stone - was destroyed on Herod, this warpstorm has begun to dissipate.'

'This we already know.' Gdolkin pointed out.

'But of course you do, Iron-Father, and I expect you have also discovered that a star system lies at its heart.'

Gdolkin did nothing to confirm or deny this. 'You said the last of the artefacts. That suggests to me that there were more than just those on the two worlds of Fornax Orbis Majoris and Herod.' Gdolkin suggested.

'You are correct once again, Iron-Father.' Thule rather begaidgingly admitted. 'There were three in total.'

'So where was the first?'

'A planet called Hekla.' Thule said.

The tech-priest said nothing else for a moment as he communed with the pict-viewer's machine spirit. Three planetary systems became highlighted on the borders of the swirling amethyst warpstorm. Next to each of these an inset box appeared containing a projection of a planet rotating steadily on its axis. There was the smog-smeared orb of the forge world, the cloudless desert sphere of Herod and a smaller, blue-white ice-locked world.

The three systems effectively formed a triangle around the area of space in which lay warpstorm Araken.

'Hekla - from the myth cycles of the Wolves of Fenris.' Gdolkon said, his Chaplain's knowledge of other Astartes Chapters' beliefs coming to the fore again.

'I see you know your legends,' the tech-priest said. 'I too have come across the same stories in my long years researching the Araken artefacts and every legend surrounding them. Hekla sounds Fenrisian because it is, or rather, she is,' the tech-priest confirmed. 'In ancient Fenrisian myth Hekla was a spiteful goddess of the underworld, ruler of the frozen hell that claimed the souls of those warriors who drowned at sea. It would seem that some time in the distant past the Sons of Russ - perhaps even the Great Wolf himself, during the Emperor's Golden Crusade - discovered, or at least named, the planet. It is a world of ice and fire, its permanently frozen surface rocked by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions emanating from the furious, molten heart of the planet.'

'How long ago was the Hekla artefact destroyed?' Librarian Melchor asked, joining the discussion.

'Within the opening weeks of what we now know is the Despoiler's thirteenth Black Crusade. Once the Heklarunsten was destroyed the chain of events, that we have inexorably become part of, was set in motion until they reached their inevitable conclusion on Herod.'

A fourth star system now became highlighted in the very midst of the turbulent warpstorm anomaly. The inset image next to this one showed a wire-frame model of the system with its star and seven orbiting planets. The fifth, the largest, was highlighted and circling that in turn was a distinct moon.

'And this is what it has all been about from the start. The one system, or rather one world within that system, hidden from humanity for thousands of years. We must enter the discharging anomaly. We must travel to that lost system.'

'Why? What awaits us there?' Gdolkin asked.

'The prize that could turn the tide of the war against the Despoiler.'

'And does this world you speak of have a name?' the Iron-Father challenged.

'Yes. I believe it to be the lost Adeptus Mechanicus outpost world of Crucible.' Thule said, his shoulders becoming hunched, his manner conspiratorial. He smiled like a lizard, in smug satisfaction, at the startled reaction his words produced from the hard-bitten Space Marines.

'Why is this happening now?' Librarian Melchor asked, his tone calm, but with gimlet eyes that looked like they could bore their way into a man's soul or through a planet's crust. 'And if you have known about the Araken artefacts for so long, why act now, when it would appear that it is already too late?'

'Because it was only with the destruction of the artefact on Hekla that I was at last able to make all the pieces mystery fit into place. And before that Warpstorm Araken was inaccessible. At the start of the Chaos forces' invasion, snowbound Hekla was attacked and the first of the Araken artefacts was annihilated. This then put me onto the trail of the second one on holy Fornax.'

'Why now?' Thule repeated the Librarian's question. 'Who knows what whims of the Dark Gods dictate the actions of their corrupted servants?'

'You would have me steer the noble *Ajax* into a warpstorm?' Captain Strake said grimly, fixing the tech-priest with his one human eye.

'The warpstorm is dissipating, captain.' Thule's tone was becoming impatient, not unlike aboard the ordinatus engine *Gehenna*, when the Iron-Father had first encountered the magos, Gdolkin thought.

'But a warpstorm nonetheless. I have to know more than you have so far told us to warrant sending my ship into a notorious spaceships' graveyard. The *Ajax* might be a strike cruiser of the Adeptus Astartes but it is no Emperor-class super heavy battlecruiser,' the Iron-Captain said.

Strake was speaking for the side of reason at last, Gdolkin thought.

'We are wasting time.' Thule fumed. 'We must not delay. The foes ranged against the Imperium will not make the same mistake. The prize is

there for the taking.'

'But the risks are great. Your prize could come at a great price, magos,' Gdolkin said, sounding the very voice of reason himself. He took a perverse pleasure in causing the tech-priest discomfort.

'If we do not claim it then it will be the enemy's for the taking!'

Gdolkin regarded Thule with a cold, steely gaze. The magos was tapping his fingers irritably on the console-desk.

'You heard what my iron brothers have to say.' Gdolkin declared. 'As far as our initial mission is concerned, as was stipulated by your honourable self, magos, we have completed it. We have fulfilled our obligation to you. Our homeworld possibly stands at the edge of doom itself. Our place is there, defending Medusa.'

Thule straightened his back, like a serpent ready to strike.

'I would remind you, Iron-Father, that you were put under my command until my mission came to fruition. It hasn't yet. Would you be the one to break the oaths sworn by the masters of your Chapter to the holy Cult Mechanicus?'

The other Space Marines looked to their leader.

Deep in his heart Gdolkin felt great indignation that Thule was in charge of this ill-fated mission. But the great clan council has charged him to put himself and his men under the technomagos's command, and to go against the council's orders would be tantamount to treason. Treason was the ultimate weakness of character, and Iron-Father Gdolkin would never give in to such a thing.

'By Medusa, of course I wouldn't.' Gdolkin snarled. 'I am no weak-willed oath-breaker!' His words reverberated from the adamantium bulkheads of the strategium.

'Well I call on those oaths now.' Thule declared. 'Those oaths are still binding.'

The Iron-Father let out a growl.

'We still need to know what we could be going to face in there or this will become nothing more than a suicide mission. I doubt that is what our forebears had in mind when they made such a binding covenant. What do you really want with the world you call Crucible?'

'Isn't it obvious? To unlock the secrets it holds. To rediscover the lost technologies that have lain there forgotten for countless centuries.' Thule was starting to sound like an Imperial preacher, so emphatic and

evangelical was his speech. 'To fulfill our quest for knowledge. After all, knowledge is life. It is our sacred calling as servants of the Machine God to preserve it.'

'And it is our sacred calling, as Space Marines, to protect the Imperium from the myriad threats that are so often brought about by mankind's obsessive search for forbidden knowledge.' Gdolkon said sternly.

Librarian Melchor stepped forward.

'Magos Thule, perhaps there is one thing you could clarify for me. I must admit to being a little confused.'

'How may I help enlighten you?' Thule said through clenched teeth, becoming more frustrated the longer this pointless debate continued. He knew what course of action they should be taking and all of this constant arguing backwards and forwards was merely allowing the enemy to reach the target first. It was just like it had been on forge world Fornax, where he had been thwarted at every turn by the incompetence and indecision of those fools around him.

'It was the servants of the forces of Chaos who destroyed the artefact on Herod.' Melchor began, 'and yet it was the Imperial forces who did so on Fornax. So either Imperial high command on the forge world was riddled with traitors or our own side inadvertently furthered the enemy's cause.'

Thule let out an audible, rattling sigh. 'At first this quandary frustrated me no end,' the tech-priest said, 'that Imperial forces had helped the Chaos army achieve their objective. The plague forces must have been preparing a rite to destroy the artefact in the Argentum Mountains, just as the Shinarii did on Herod. And when their plan came to fruition I felt that all was lost. That is until I witnessed the subsequent change in activity within the anomaly. I had misread the sources from the start. I must have been missing one vital part of the puzzle that would have unlocked this enigma.'

'Then it would appear that, even considering the immediate effects of destroying the artefacts, the Chaos factions on Fornax Orbis Majoris and Herod were all prepared to sacrifice themselves to bring about the banishment of the warpstorm anomaly. If this is what the deranged servants of Chaos wanted to happen, then this prize you speak of, magos, cannot be something that the Imperium would want, surely?'

Melchor was a man of few words but he chose those words carefully. And when he spoke people listened.

'It is possible that the forces of Chaos did not know what would happen. Perhaps their dark overlords did not warn them of the cost of the price they would have to pay.'

'I find this unlikely.' Gdolkon said. 'Any commander, even one as twisted and warped as the Despoiler, does not so readily sacrifice his soldiers without good cause. Whatever lies on this Crucible of yours must be of incredible value or benefit to the Chaos hosts for them to surrender so much to claim it. How could loyal servants of the Emperor want the same thing? What is this prize? Do you even know what it is?'

'Very well, Iron-Father, although it pains me that you would doubt a grand magos of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Could not doubt be considered a weakness?' No matter how urgent his mission, Thule could not resist making a dig at Gdolkon. The Iron-Father had earned the magos's enmity at their first meeting aboard the *Gehenna*.

'As a wise warrior once told me, a healthy dose of scepticism can be of great benefit to a commander.'

'Then let me go back to the beginning.' Thule said. He sounded strained, his voice heavy with gravitas. Revealing his secrets to those whom he considered to be the uninitiated - even though they were Iron Hands and one of them held the rank of Iron-Father, a Chaplain-Techmarine of his order - patently pained Thule deeply. Obviously it was hard to change the habits of many lifetimes. 'Centuries ago I uncovered a reference to the lost world of Crucible and the Tomb of the Ironclad, amidst the archive labyrinths of Mars.'

Something the tech-priest had said seized Gdolkon. Implanted mimetic memory-chips began to search through the innumerable pieces of information codified in his brain.

'The ancient manuscript I had stumbled across revealed that thousands of years ago, during one of the Despoiler's earlier Black Crusades, the techno-magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus had created an outpost on a star system close to the Eye of Terror and fashioned a mighty army there to defeat the forces of Chaos. However, something went wrong and the world was absorbed by warpstorm Araken. It was this one manuscript that set me on my quest. It took me from planet to planet, sector to sector, and steadily I uncovered more details, more clues as to the location of Crucible and of the curious Araken artefacts. At the start of this latest Black Crusade, the snowbound world of Hekla was attacked and an obelisk

- one of the artefacts - was destroyed. This put me at last onto the trail for the next and ultimately, I hoped, to lost Crucible itself. But as you know, the forces of Chaos were always one step ahead of me. I was playing a desperate game trying to catch up with their plans.'

'How did the servants of the Despoiler know of the existence of the artefacts ahead of you, if it took you centuries of searching to uncover the truth?' Captain Strake asked, interrupting the magos's long-awaited explanation.

'Who knows what blasphemous secrets the daemons of the warp reveal to the chosen of the Fell Powers?'

'So what purpose did these artefacts serve?' Melchor asked, intrigued. 'Who was it that built them?'

'I do not know who built them; the sources are unclear on that matter. Some suggest they were of xenos origin, others even propose that they were creations of the Adeptus Mechanicus. If so, then the techno-art of such lith-engineering is lost to us now, like so much else. Which is why we must see this quest through to its conclusion!'

As Thule spoke a rotating wire-frame image of an eight-sided obelisk appeared on the pict-screen, overlaid with various pieces of data and cogitator references.

'As to their purpose, the readings I was able to take from the Bei'bul Stone before it was destroyed suggest that the artefacts, linked to their associated cave networks that somehow helped amplify the planets' own energy-fields, kept Warpstorm Araken in place.'

'I can think of no better way of hiding something,' Strake commented.

'Having specially consecrated each of the artefacts within the three vital systems surrounding the Araken Anomaly, the forces of Chaos were able to destroy them and so, at last, release Crucible from the inaccessible warpstorm and allow the prize lying there to be claimed. I see it now so clearly,' Thule said almost wistfully. 'I had thought that the artefacts had to be preserved and that the enemy sought their destruction, but they actually *had* to be destroyed for them to be able to reveal their secrets to us.'

'My intention now, as it has always been, is to find the army that my ancestors in the Cult Mechanicus created on Crucible and use it to help the Imperium crush the Despoiler's thirteenth Black Crusade, just as the Arch-Fiend has brought other ancient weapons to bear against the Imperium.'

'How can we be certain that exposure to the warpstorm has not tainted this prize you so desperately seek?' Melchor asked. 'The warp is a fickle and dangerous mistress.'

'I too feel uneasy about this still.' Strake declared, pointing at the pict-screen. 'These artefacts have been fashioned with eight sides; a number strongly associated with the Chaos powers. Surely it cannot be a coincidence that the Chaos cults were performing rituals that involved these artefacts? Have you thought that the artefacts might have been created for the sole purpose of purging the warpstorm, in order to unlock its dark secrets? I believe that nothing but ill awaits us on Crucible.'

'If you believe that so strongly.' Thule railed, 'then surely it is your Emperor-given duty to purge the world of its evil and stop it falling into the filthy claws of Chaos!' The tech-priest's mechadendrites writhed menacingly over his shoulders.

'But you are still asking me to take the *Ajax* into a warpstorm.' Strake countered. 'I realise that the Araken Anomaly appears to be changing in nature - burning itself out - but to pilot a ship into such a spatial storm, to brave the warping gravitational effects and the Emperor alone knows what other warp-born horrors, even with an Astartes strike cruiser, is to invite disaster.'

'How long until the warpstorm dissipates entirely?' Melchor asked. 'Can it be calculated?'

'It does not matter how long. Too long. Now that their prize is within reach, the Chaos forces will not delay any longer.' Thule railed.

'Magos Thule.' Iron-Father Gdolk said calmly, having been unusually quiet as the tech-priest revealed more of what he knew to the Iron Hands. 'If you might give us a few minutes alone?'

'What?' the tech-priest said, startled. 'I suppose, if you must, but I would remind you all that this mission is under my command!'

Gdolk said nothing else more, merely waited as Thule at last turned on his heel and left the captain's strategium chamber, following by his silent attendant adepts and skull-servitor.

'This is lunacy.' Iron-Captain Strake said, once the bulkhead door had sealed again behind the tech-priest.

'We are going to Crucible.' Gdolk said, a hint of excitement in his voice.

'I sense a change in you, Gdolkin.' Melchor said. 'What has caused this dramatic change in attitude?'

'The Tomb of the Ironclad. You heard the priest mention it?'

'Yes.' Melchor replied, 'but what of it?'

'Brother-Librarian, I would have thought that you, part of whose role within the Chapter is to record the great deeds of our clan and our Chapter, would know of the legend, even if other brothers might not.'

'Recording the deeds of our Chapter is not my only role, as well you know, Iron-Father. As guardian of the souls of those warriors under your command you certainly have a more extensive knowledge of the legends of our Chapter, particularly perhaps the more apocryphal ones.'

'You are right, Melchor.' Gdolkin agreed, nodding. 'Tell me, do you recall what happened to our blessed primarch Ferrus Manus at the end of the Horus Heresy, ten thousand years ago?'

'Of course I do, Gdolkin. Every initiate knows the tale, as do many of the common folk of Medusa.'

'Humour me.' Gdolkin said, with no suggestion of humour in his voice.

'According to the Scriptorium of Iron, Great Ferrus spearheaded the assault on Istvaan V against the traitor Horus and his treacherous allies but those forces that should have backed up the initial attack themselves turned traitor. It was a dark day for our Chapter indeed. Ferrus Manus and his warriors were outnumbered. After the terrible and bloody battle his body was never recovered.'

Gdolkin could sense the anger rising in Melchor at his recollection of the events of those fateful times.

'Precisely,' the Iron-Father said smoothly. 'The primarch's body was never found. That is the commonly held version of events, but there are a number of different accounts that suggest Ferrus was found, and that he somehow survived. One tale says that his wrecked body was rescued and restored, that he was taken to Mars and that he resides there still.'

'But that is a rumour refuted by our Chapter, put about by certain factions among the Adeptus Mechanicus.' Melchor declared, outraged.

'I know, brother. But there are other apocryphal writings in the annals of our Chapter, that I have studied, which speak of a similar series of events. These histories refer to Primarch Ferrus Manus as the "Ironclad", in a number of places in the text, and hint at what might have happened to him. In this text its now unknown author says that Ferrus Manus was rescued,

on the brink of death, but rather than being taken to "the crucible of Mars by its servants", as the other legend tells, that the primarch was taken by, "the servants of Mars to the Crucible" and that he slept there for an eternity.'

Melchor and Strake looked at Gdolkin, dumbfounded.

'It cannot be,' the Librarian gasped.

'By Medusa,' the captain swore. 'I daren't believe it.'

'What if our primarch awaits us on that world? What if he lies in stasis-sleep on Crucible? What if that is the true prize that awaits Thule? Mighty Ferrus Manus, the Light-Bringer. If so then this is a cause for which I would readily lay down my life.'

The Iron-Father fixed each of the other Iron Hands in turn with his stern gaze.

'It is decided then.' Iron-Captain Strake said, sounding somewhat distant, as though the revelation he had just heard had not yet had time to sink in.

'It is decided.' Gdolkin said. 'Let enter the warp-storm.'

A COURSE WAS SET and strike cruiser *Ajax* broke orbit around Herod. Within twelve days the vessel had reached the roiling boundaries of the dissipating warpstorm and the Iron Hands, and their guests, felt its effects for the first time.

The *Ajax* was tossed about like a leaf in a hurricane or a twig trapped within a tempestuous ocean whirlpool. Tendrils of discharging energy, with the force of solar flares, lashed the shields of the ship, draining power levels across the strike cruiser. The craft's ancient engines battled to keep the *Ajax* on course, flying in the face of the dissipating warpstorm.

It was not only the ship that suffered the effects of the anomaly's death-throes. Not only was there the physical shaking of the ship, something akin to an earthquake, which only Iron-Captain Strake seemed truly unaffected by, but there were also the biological and mental side effects. Those on board suffered migraines, nosebleeds and an unfortunate few - but none among the more resilient Space Marines - fatal embolisms.

But of those who survived the experience none suffered more greatly than Librarian Melchor.

Melchor was a warrior-mystic of the Iron Hands Chapter, endowed with powers and abilities that set him apart from his brothers and that normally

gave him some advantage in his confrontations with the enemy. But now these same psychic gifts made him all the more susceptible and vulnerable to the never-forgotten agony of the warp-ghosts assailing the *Ajax* as the warpstorm blew itself out in a glorious eruption of warp energy.

For carried within the discharging warpstorm were the psychic death-screams of the thousands upon thousands who had lost their lives within the Araken Anomaly, their ships torn apart by the forces of the warpstorm, the psychic agony of their death-throes preserved forever within the supernatural fabric of the nebula.

Locked within his cabin, focussing his mind in an attempt to put up a mental wall to stop the psychic assault, Librarian Melchor became like a ravening, feral beast, his body contorted by epileptic seizures, foaming at the mouth, his eyes rolling.

The Librarian's animal screams echoed throughout the holds and corridors of the ship as Melchor endured his own private vision of hell. Assailed by the screaming skull-faces of the warp-ghosts of the masses that had been devoured by the warpstorm, his mind's defences were stripped away and his consciousness psychically scoured by the tearing mental talons of the entities that had been formed in the warp and of the warp itself.

One by one Melchor's mental defences crumbled, the barriers were broken down, and his naked soul was exposed to the full horror of everything the warp had to hold.

CRUCIBLE

'When there is no other way, the perilous path is the only road to salvation.'

- Eldrad Ulthran, Farseer of Ulthwe Craftworld

TEN

CORRUPTER

THE ARAKEN SYSTEM

THE IRON HANDS' strike cruiser *Ajax* drifted at the edge of a star system that had been lost to the Imperium for as many eons as it could take for entire civilisations to rise and fall. Its shields were down, its adamantium hull sporting gouged ruts. The largest was sixty metres long and as wide as a Space Marine was tall. These injuries had been caused to the ship by the ethereal talons of warp-born entities that clung to a spectral existence amidst the spaceship graveyard in which the *Ajax* now found itself. The Astartes vessel wore its battle scars with pride.

The ship looked like just another lifeless wreck cast adrift within the spaceships' graveyard that circled the fringes of the forgotten system. Hundreds, if not thousands of them, had all been lost, Gdolkín guessed, to Warpstorm Araken over the millennia. The wrecked vessels were not only human in origin. There were also the dead hulks of other, alien civilisations. Gdolkín recognised the ships of many xenos races, from his years campaigning for the Emperor, displayed on the main screen of the cruiser's bridge.

The light of the distant sun picked out the smooth, sleek curves of an eldar vessel and next to it, one that looked alike but for its contrasting jagged lines and barbed fins. There was the blocky, geometric form of a class of ship belonging to a mysterious race that Gdolkín only knew as a name - the ff eng, and many more designs of ship that the Iron-Father had no knowledge of.

Then the targeting locators of his augmetic eye locked onto a more recognisable form, a long, slender craft with a saw-toothed prow that belonged to the nekulli. There was even a ship that resembled a tomb-ship of the eons-dead necrontyr although, as the Iron-Father knew from bitter personal experience, such craft might not always be as lifeless as they at first appeared, even after millions of years lost to the void.

Some craft looked as if they had collided in the warp and become fused. There was a sheed cruiser locked in a deathly embrace with an ancient, hull-scarred baroque leviathan that appeared to be human in origin, but pre-dated anything Gdolkín had ever seen in use amongst the fleets of any sector battlefleet. The sheed ship had harpooned the ancient human vessel amidships. The command tower of the ship's bridge was half broken off, frozen as it toppled, it appeared, in the zero-g of open space, one wing of the eagle statue standing beneath the bridge drooping forlornly.

The human ships trapped within this space junkyard covered the whole gamut of mankind's wanderings between the stars. The beams of the *Ajax's* own high intensity spotlights traced the name of an Imperial warship which declaimed, in letters twenty metres high, that this was the *Indomitus Rex*, lost for who knew how many years, decades, centuries - millennia even.

There were Ecclesiarchy missionary cruisers, rogue trader vessels, massive Titan transporters and an Adepta Sororitas ship bearing the towering image of sightless fate: a maiden, blindfolded and holding a sword and shield. Her face had been forever scarred by meteorite fragments. Gdolkín even saw the long, threatening dagger-form of one of the black ships of the Inquisition, bearing the image of a trisected "I", a hundred metres high, on its flank.

Eventually running lights ignited all along the hull of the *Ajax* again, outlining comms-arrays and weapon turrets. Shields were restored, surrounding the ship with a shell of coruscating amethyst energy, the

plasma engines fired and the strike cruiser was no longer just another wreck adrift in this cemetery of lost ships.

The vessel powered forwards, setting a course for the fourth planet from the system's sun, a bloated green gas giant, and the small dark moon circling the leviathan world.

HAVING BATTLED THE turbulence of the warpstorm it was as though they had now entered the calm at the eye, Iron-Father Gdolkin thought. Through the lattice-worked armacrys dome that projected from the outer hull of the ship, he could see the dead hulks of the interstellar wrecks. The dark, lifeless face of an ork kill kroozer drifted past, its prow sporting long, twisting scars, dotted with circular blisters that looked like they had been caused by suckered tentacles, but tentacles that must have been several hundred metres in length.

Gdolkin could just see the vast, green corona of the gas giant through the right side of the observation dome, although he couldn't see the moon that was their final destination from his position. Beyond that, the black oblivion of space was tinged red, purple and orange by the aurora ribbons of the clearing storm, as the warp disturbance's physical manifestation of the Araken dust nebula broke up and was swept away into the void beyond the edge of the star system, carried on the unseen currents of the empyrean.

He looked down from the edge of the gantry that jutted out into the open space of the dome and saw one of the many portside weapon batteries tracking the wreckage field. His two servitor-guards waited in patient, silent attendance.

The *Ajax* and its crew of Iron Hands' officers, its army of thralls, bound to serfdom service aboard the strike cruiser, and countless servitors, hardwired directly into the myriad operational systems of the ship, couldn't be too careful. They knew that they were not the only ones out here hunting for the prize.

Gdolkin's hearts leapt. To think, it might be their primarch, Ferrus Manus himself, who awaited them, held in stasis for a hundred centuries, so that his wounds could heal, tended to by the oath-bonded brethren of the Cult Mechanicus.

If the Breaker of Darkness, the Light-Bringer, were to be returned to the bosom of the Chapter founded of his own flesh and blood, then Ferrus

Manus would be the first and only one of the Emperor's mighty sons to be returned to the Emperor's side since the apocalyptic events of the galaxy-dividing Horus Heresy.

A part of his initiation into the holy role of Iron-Father had taught Gdolkon that fully half of those titans among men had turned from the path of the Emperor's light in those dark days. Some had even died, whether they were traitors, like the snake-tongued deceiver Alpharius of the Alpha Legion, or loyal to the Emperor, like the angelic Sanguinius of the Blood Angels, cut down by the Great Betrayer Horus himself. The rest who had remained loyal to the Emperor in that great Imperium-rivening war, continued their crusade against Chaos elsewhere, in another existence, such as the White Scars' father Jaghatai Khan or Leman Russ of the Sons of Fenris. Legends claimed that they would return one day, to fight for the Emperor once again at the hour of the Imperium's direst need.

Surely such a time was now, with the forces of Chaos pouring out of the Eye of Terror, like filth oozing from a suppurating abscess. They were united under one banner - the banner of the Warmaster of Chaos himself - he who had fought at Horus's right-hand ten thousand years ago, and who still championed the dogma of the Dark Gods one hundred centuries later.

Such a time was indeed now, and Iron-Father Gdolkon had been given a glimpse of the way to a great future, with Ferrus Manus reunited with his noble brethren at last.

So it was only meet and right that the Iron Hands keep an ever watchful eye out for danger, to prevent the enemy from striking first and claiming their "prize" - or the primarch's life - for themselves.

Crucible was close now. The *Ajax* had practically reached high orbit above the moon, but Iron-Captain Strake was taking the approach slowly, proceeding with caution through the hazardous screen of mountain-sized asteroids and derelict ships. Navigating the ship's way through this ever-changing maze required careful manoeuvring. A single mistake could result in the void shields being knocked out across the ship, at least. In the worst-case scenario it could result in the *Ajax* being knocked off course, the hull being breached, or the whole vessel being crushed between two of the massive monoliths.

And the Iron Hands didn't want anything to go wrong now, not while they were the only ones near enough to uncover the secret Crucible had been hiding for so long. They needed to reach Crucible before the Chaos

forces, who had manipulated events so as to free this system from the Araken Anomaly, could claim it - or destroy it! - for themselves. Gdolkin had commanded an astropathic communication to be sent to Medusa, reporting what they believed might await them on the planet, just in case their mission befell some terrible tragedy and such knowledge be lost altogether. But if they did fail, and if the Iron Hands' homeworld was even able to send another recovery vessel, they would be too late to stop the Chaos host making its way to this self same system ahead of them.

The gutted carcass of a craft constructed from a series of interlinking hemispherical pods swung gracefully past the viewing dome, exposing its rent-open underside.

The wrecks Gdolkin was watching glide sedately past the *Ajax* had become part of the asteroid field circling the moon of Crucible having been thrown up here by the warpstorm. Some were almost intact shells; others were no more than so many pieces of interstellar flotsam.

Gdolkin found himself wondering why the moon had an asteroid field at all. The slow-spinning space rocks showed no signs of human alteration or adaptation; they bore no signs of weapons platforms or orbital docks, unlike those asteroid belts orbiting certain other Adeptus Mechanicus worlds like Vaznagrod or Taslan's Forge, or the orbital shipyards of Naval bases such as Hydraphur and St. Salvus Dock.

Was the existence of the asteroid belt also a result of the cataclysmic accident that Magos Thule believed had befallen the Adeptus Mechanicus enclave on Crucible?

Gdolkin did not know why he had come here, to this place on the ship. He gazed out at the infinite vista of the starfield in a contemplative mood. He and his men, noble Iron Hands all, were on the verge of commencing their true quest, the one that the Emperor had really sent them to this place to accomplish. He could be on board the bridge with Captain Strake, monitoring the strike cruiser's approach on Crucible, or checking on his men as they prepared for planetfall, or giving the warriors in his charge a rousing speech about the nature of virtue, nobility, courage and honour.

But perhaps that was why he had sought out the calm of the observation promenade. For, other than the steady thrumming of the engine core, this was the only truly quiet place on the ship where he could meditate whilst looking upon the wondrous marvels of the God-Emperor's realm.

They were approaching the moon of a planet in one long-forgotten system, which had not enjoyed the Emperor's grace for thousands of years. And yet the Imperium of Mankind spread from the wild, northern fringes of the Segmentum Obscurus to the border systems of the Ultima Segmentum, a distance reckoned in thousands of light years. A million worlds acknowledged the Emperor as their lord, their provider and protector, their saviour from the evils of Chaos and the warp.

To be a man in these times, even a Space Marine and a commander of the Adeptus Astartes, was to be one amongst untold trillions.

But Gdolkín was on a mission, the outcome of which could not only turn the tide of war and liberate a hundred worlds from the very immediate threat of the Despoiler's thirteenth Black Crusade but which could also herald a return to the golden age of the Emperor's Great Crusade, ten thousand years past, with the Iron Hands at the fore, led by their Primarch Ferrus Manus, the first of the Emperor's sons to be returned to mankind.

Gdolkín might only be one man, but he was one man who could make a difference.

He moved away from the pearlescent observation blister and strolled on at a stately, meditative pace past the arched portholes that spilled the colour-tinted light of distant stars into the passageway. The stained glass windows showed momentous occasions from the history of the Iron Hands' Chapter, from the Great Crusade through the events of the Horus Heresy to the deeds of the Grailsword Campaign and on towards the present. The most recently fitted window, as Strake had proudly informed Gdolkín, on the first leg of their journey from Medusa to the Chaos-besieged forge world, was one depicting the Iron Hands' victorious stand against the invading xenos-spawn of Hive Fleet Leviathan on the one-time paradise world of Yspotua in 997.M41.

He did not need mimetic chips to help him recall the part he himself had played in the battle amidst the scorched fields of the Onyxshard Gardens. The Iron-Father looked down at his shining silvered left hand, dappled blue and green by the diffused stained glass light. The blessed augmetic had served him well that day.

Gdolkín looked in turn to the newer bionic that stood in for his right hand, taking in the intricate detail of the embossed Imperial eagle on the back of the hand and the glowering skulls on every metal knuckle joint. The memory of how he had lost that hand was still raw in his mind...

The Iron-Father heard the hiss of a bulkhead door opening, but did not turn around until the clumping steps ringing on the metal floor of the promenade were almost right behind him. Apothecary Caduceus stood there, resplendent in his clean white armour.

He had obviously made it a priority to clean the ceramite of the blood, filth, mud and sand dirtying it, and polish up a shine on its gleaming surface again. A properly functioning suit of power armour was as important to a Space Marine as a healthy body, if not more important, and the Apothecary knew that as well as any other brother aboard the *Ajax*.

'I thought I might find you here, Iron-Father.' Caduceus said.

'How goes it, brother-apothecary?' Gdolkin asked, his tone as steely as his expression. 'Have you come to report on the status of our warriors before the battle for the prize begins?'

'Indeed I have.'

'And how is our Brother-Librarian?'

'In truth, a shadow of his former self after his ordeal.'

'Will he recover?'

'Given time he could, although I do not know if he will ever display the kind of abilities we have seen from him before.'

'And what about in the struggle that surely awaits us in our search for the Tomb of the Ironclad?'

'I am sure that Librarian Melchor will do his best not to let us down.'

'And what of Brother-Sergeant Dagan's squad? How are they faring?'

'They are much improved,' Caduceus said, his tone more positive. 'They will be ready to fight alongside us again.'

There was a moment's silence, heavy with the expectation of something waiting to be said.

'We number only twenty-one. Do you think it will be enough?'

'Have faith, brother-apothecary,' Gdolkin chided, his voice developing a sharper edge. 'You would do well to remember the words of the Imperial creed: *No army is big enough to conquer the galaxy, but faith alone can overturn the universe. No matter how many we and our allies number, if our cause is just and righteous, we shall prevail!*

The Iron-Father and the Apothecary walked on for a moment longer, silent other than for the wheezing and whirring of Gdolkin's servitor bodyguard, as they kept pace with the one their programming bond them to protect. Beyond the leaded panes of the stained glass armacrys

windows, the sundered hull of a bloated massed troop transporter gaped like the maw of some plankton-eating, ocean-dwelling behemoth.

'Tell me, Gdolkin,' Caduceus said at last. 'Do you know for certain that the primarch awaits us on Crucible?'

The Iron-Father paused and gazed passed the transparent, painted image of a dreadnought, bearing the device of Ferrus's gauntlet, gunning down white-helmed, cyan-armoured eldar, to the mountainous shapes of the asteroid belt beyond.

'Caduceus, I only know what I have read and what the magos has seen fit to reveal to me. However what I believe—'

Gdolkin broke off in mid-sentence. He had seen something move within the shadows of the ghost-haunted wrecks surrounding the *Ajax*, a disconcertingly familiar arrowhead shape.

'What is it, Iron-Father?'

Ignoring the Apothecary, Gdolkin keyed his vox. 'Gdolkin to bridge. Contact off the port bow. Do you have it on the scope?'

The object glided out of cover, from beneath the sail-fins of an eldar Eclipse-class frigate, and out into the open. Not all of the wrecks were as dead as they at first appeared.

A second later a sonorous klaxon sounded within the corridor, and throughout the rest of the ship.

'We have it, Iron-Father,' the captain of the *Ajax* replied.

'To the bridge!' Gdolkin commanded.

There was the shudder of an impact, the groan of the cruiser's hull protesting, a secondary dull boom and then the ship heaved around the Space Marines. Gdolkin and Caduceus were hurled to the floor of the promenade gantry, the two servitors toppling wood-enly after them.

'Red Mars!' Gdolkin exclaimed. 'We have to get to the bridge!'

Having picked themselves up, the two Iron Hands moved at a run, the servo-motors in their armoured suits allowing them to move at speed despite the great weight of the thick bonded ceramite plates.

The *Ajax* was under attack.

THE *CORRUPTER OF COLCHIS* hove into view from amidst the derelict shapes of the spaceship wrecks, gliding through the asteroid field like some submarine predator. Away from the shadow of the desolate derelicts that had hidden it, the shark-like form of the battleship was clear, its

distinctive outline threatening against the backdrop of the void, the ruddy bronze of its hull the colour of dried blood.

Seven kilometres of gargoyle-encrusted weapon ports, arched launch bays, and baroquely ornamented torpedo tubes cut through the space between the ancient battleship and the exposed strike cruiser, closing the gap between them, as the *Corrupter* bore down on the *Ajax*.

Three thousand years ago the capital ship of the Word Bearers' Legion had been lost to the warp, following the Manatova Rout in the Segmentum Tempestus. Four and a half thousand years previously the *Corrupter of Colchis* had carried out a bloody raid on the separatist worlds within the systems of the Ghost Stars, beyond the wilderness marches of the Ultima Segmentum. Seven thousand three hundred years before, the battleship had been part of a Chaos fleet that had blockaded the Uroboros Worlds for seven years, preying on rogue trader vessels and Adeptus Arbites ships that tried to break the cordon. Nine thousand years ago the *Corrupter* had been making pillaging runs out of the Chaos-cursed warp-realspace overlap of the Maelstrom to gather new followers to the Word Bearers' daemonic faith. Ten thousand years ago the vessel had reached orbit around Mars as the forces of the Warmaster Horus made war at the very gates of Terra. Before that the ship had once proudly borne the name *Vox Veritas* and had fought alongside the ships of Battlefleet Solar.

The ancient vessel's prow lance battery charged again and fired. A beam of intense energy, more powerful than a planet-bound electrical storm covered the distance between the two craft and smashed into the port side of the Astartes strike cruiser a second time. The *Ajax* lurched to one side as its void shields failed, allowing the laser blast to rip through six decks, breaching the hull and knocking out twenty-two guncrews. Hundreds of servitors, thralls and their adept supervisors were incinerated in the blast or sucked out into space to explosively decompress as their barrier with the unforgiving vacuum was removed.

A white mist was now venting from the hole in the Imperial strike cruiser's side. The *Ajax* was bleeding its artificially maintained atmosphere out into space. At last the leak was brought under control as emergency bulkheads sealed off the damaged section of the ship.

The remaining operational portside weapon batteries fired, cannons that would dwarf the size of ground-based static Earthshaker platforms, launching shells three times the size of a man at the Chaos cruiser. With

the *Corrupter* closing on the *Ajax* many of the macro-cannon shells found their mark. The explosives detonated but with the shrapnel clouds expanding slowly into the void the battleship came on, having suffered little apparent damage.

The Astartes starship had been ambushed by the much larger leviathan of the Word Bearers' Traitor Legion.

With one effective strike, had the Chaos battleship hit the strike cruiser's plasma engines, it could have easily destroyed or at least crippled the Imperial ship. The *Ajax*, in return, had barely even scratched the adamantium hull of the *Corrupter*. With the Chaos vessel closing abeam off the *Ajax*, the Iron Hands' vessel could not bring its prow or starboard weapons batteries to bear. As long as this situation remained the strike cruiser would be easy prey for the Chaos vessel.

'WHAT ARE THEY doing?' Strake growled. 'The ship's just sitting there.'

The Iron-Captain and Iron-Father were watching the Chaos vessel through the main viewscreen, its ruddy-shadow making it seem like an open wound in the fabric of space itself. A gigantic, fire-wreathed daemon head, fixed to the prow of the battleship's hull, declared quite clearly the allegiances of those Traitor Legions on board.

The wailing of klaxons could still be heard in the distance and the bridge was awash with the crimson glow of emergency lighting.

'I know what they're doing.' Gdolkon said ominously. 'They're preparing to board.'

'What?' exclaimed Strake. 'They could have us as we stand. Against the might of their battleship, and after the trauma the *Ajax* suffered braving the warpstorm, we are practically defenceless!'

'Yes, captain, but the traitors are Word Bearers, who wish to convert the loyal to their vile faith. There is more glory for them if they conquer us in hand-to-hand combat. If any from amongst our crew survive they will be cruelly indoctrinated into their dark religion and be turned upon those loyal believers who still honour the Imperial creed, when the Word Bearers visit their evil upon the next world to fall under their dark shadow.'

'Enemy preparing to fire torpedoes!' a thrall announced from his console position.

'Prepare to repel boarders!' Gdolkon commanded Iron-Captain Strake.

'And what will you do?' the *Ajax's* commander asked.

Gdolkin paused for a moment, barely heeding the wailing of the klaxons and the background hubbub of a starship going into battle. A deep hatred was boiling within him, that any foul spawn of Chaos should have the audacity to challenge the Iron Hands when they were on the verge of making the greatest discovery in the ten thousand-year history of their Chapter.

Such burning anger could only be sated in brutal battle.

'I said that there would be a reckoning between us,' he muttered, staring at the traitor vessel on the bridge viewscreen, augmetic ocular targeters locking onto the gaping mouths of the battleship's torpedo tubes.

'Torpedo engines firing!'

'Iron-Father?' Strake asked. 'What are your orders? What would you have us do?'

Gdolkin felt torn. He wanted to stay and defend his vessel, just as he had wanted to remain on Medusa to confront the threat facing his ancient homeworld. And yet he also desperately wanted - no, needed - to find his primarch, to find out if the legends, if what he believed, were true. If he had not left Medusa on this mission, although he bitterly resented having to do so at the time, he would never have found himself here, in this forgotten system, with the Tomb of the Ironclad almost within reach, and within the tomb...

The traitors' eagerness to prove themselves in battle and to capture more converts to be indoctrinated into their Chaotic creed would be their undoing, Gdolkin swore, for it would give the outnumbered Iron Hands the chance they needed to complete their mission.

'We cannot waste any time.' Gdolkin commanded. 'I will leave one squad of my men aboard to help your crew defend the *Ajax*. The rest of my force and I, along with the entirety of Thule's entourage, will descend to the moon before it is too late.'

'Very well, Iron-Father,' Strake said, his voice weighed down with solemnity.

'Iron-Captain, what exterminatus measures do you currently carry aboard the *Ajax*?' Gdolkin asked.

'Cyclonic torpedoes. But why do you ask? Are you expecting to need them?'

'It is always best to go into battle prepared for every eventuality, captain. Now, take us in as close as you can, then do all you can to evade the *Corrupter*. We will signal you when we are ready to return. Ferrus go with you.'

'And with you too.'

'Enemy torpedoes launched!' the thrall yelled. 'Six incoming!'

As the Iron-Father left the bridge to prepare for moonfall, Strake gripped his command pulpit with two hands of steel. 'Full power to the engines! Take us in with all haste. And watch out for those space rocks, by Medusa. Ommissiah bless us, we don't want to lose a laser battery or comms spire to one of those damned asteroids, but we don't to be too shy of them either.'

DEEP IN THE belly of the Iron Hands' strike cruiser, the Thunderhawk *Iron Eagle* was being prepped for take-off and three shuttles, containing Magos Omega Thule's entourage of tech-guard, tech-adepts and battle-servitors, were being readied for launch, as Iron-Father Gdolkin's orders were relayed throughout the great vessel.

In a matter of minutes the Iron Hands' Adeptus Mechanicus force would be ready to deploy, as they had been preparing for planetfall ever since the location of Crucible had been revealed to them.

In minutes the salvo of torpedoes launched at the strike cruiser by the *Corrupter of Colchis* would make contact, despite Iron-Captain Strake's evasive manoeuvres. The smaller torpedoes' engines were designed for a much shorter, but more powerful burn, so that they could cover the distance between a battleship and its target - which might be as much as several thousand kilometres - in the shortest space of time possible. It was hard for a spaceship to avoid a torpedo salvo once launched, even if the target was moving, as it still took some time to move several kilometres and many, many mega-tonnes of spacecraft out of the line of fire.

And when the barrage did reach the *Ajax*, the battle-brothers of Squad Vincien would be waiting to repel boarders.

THE SIX CHAOS-CONSECRATED torpedoes tore through the void towards the Iron Hands' vessel, travelling at hundreds of kilometres a second. Gyroscopic stabilisers and daemon-spirited cogitators kept the

massive ordnance projectiles on course. But it was not enough, thanks to a combination of the ever-changing maze of the asteroid field, the gravitational pull of the larger, rotating rocks and Iron-Captain Strake's skill married with centuries of experience, plying the spaceways and encountering almost everything the void could throw at him.

Of the six torpedoes launched one collided head-on with the spinning mass of a cratered asteroid, vaporising the Traitor Marines trapped inside in an instant. A second missile was only clipped by a rock, but the damage was serious enough to rip out half its engine assembly. Trailing the half-organic intestines of its internal daemon-corrupted machinery behind it, and with its guidance systems crippled, the torpedo collided with a third missile causing their mutual detonation only two kilometres from the *Ajax's* own plasma engines. Two more missiles missed the *Ajax* altogether, blasting further and further out into the intractable depths of uncharted space, the Word Bearers on board being left to drift for an eternity in which only insanity and the mindless, savage slaughter of each other awaited.

Of the six torpedoes launched, only one remained. But one could be enough.

IN THE RUDDY darkness of the boarding torpedo the Word Bearers assault squad waited, firmly secured within their seats by locking clamps. The torpedo shook and rattled violently around them as it suffered all manner of stresses, from the contrary gravitational flux created by the asteroid field's larger, haphazardly spinning bodies, to those created by its own propulsion system.

Beneath the roar of the torpedo's engines and the rattling of its missile body a low murmur permeated the crew compartment as the Word Bearers chanted the foul litany of their debased prayers, calling on the aid of their hellish patron deities.

They were to be the vanguard of the attack on the weakling servants of the false emperor, bringing the unbelievers the true word, teaching them the error of their ways, the false hope of their beliefs, offering then-souls to mankind's true masters. Their archaic, debased armour had been consecrated to the fell pantheon of Chaos through being daubed with the blood of the eight sacraments. There would be no stopping them.

With a violent bone-shaking clang the torpedo found its target. The Bearers of the Word checked their weapons for the last time and punched the release studs on their restraining harnesses.

The tortured grinding of metal reverberated throughout the compartment as the torpedo's las-drill nose-cone bored its way through the remaining metres of adamantium hull that had not ruptured under the force of the initial collision, and into the belly of the strike cruiser.

Then it was through. With the growling groan of servos, the tip of the torpedo opened like the fanged maw of some monstrous reptile.

The leader of the Word Bearers stepped forward through the smoke filling the passageway beyond, into the gloom of the vessel's interior. Cruel satisfaction crawled up from his gut into his black heart. The weaklings' ship already appeared to be consecrated to the dark gods of the Word Bearers, bathed as the invaders were in the dull scarlet glow of emergency glow-globes.

The blood-smoke cleared. Black-armoured giants, the Word Bearers' match in size and strength, awaited them. The traitors would pay for their sacrilege in the currency of their own blood.

'Warriors of Iron! Sons of Medusa!' Sergeant Vincien bellowed. 'Attack!'

AS THE VOID-TO-AIR drop-ships fell away towards the dark surface of the moon below, the *Ajax* fired its plasma engines again and was away as well, the faster, slighter strike cruiser moving swiftly out of range of the much larger and slower Chaos battleship.

The engagement that would follow would be a slow tactical game of hunter and prey. For now, though, Iron-Captain Strake took his ship deeper into the asteroid field, trying to draw the *Conuption of Colchis* away from Cmcible, so as to allow Iron-Father Gdolkin and Magos Thule to fulfil their mutual missions. And besides, the *Ajax* itself still had another part to play before this great undertaking was at an end.

And the *Corrupter* would follow, in time, but first it would deliver its own consignment onto the contested world below that orbited a long lost star. There was one aboard who would not let the prize he had waited so long for, so many centuries for - so many millennia for - slip from his grasp now.

Launch bay blast doors opened in the underbelly of the Chaos vessel and the *Corrupter* disgorged its hellish payload. A torrent of dreadclaw drop-pods and drop-ships emerged from the battleship, sweeping down on the world of Crucible like a swarm of ravening locusts, a blizzard of black shapes that far outnumbered the pitifully few craft that had disembarked from the Iron Hands' strike cruiser. And the ships continued to come.

The Word Bearers had reached the goal of their three thousand year-long pilgrimage. They had come for their prize and the object of their quest was almost within their filthy grasp.

Crucible was theirs.

ELEVEN

TOMB OF THE IRONCLAD

**ADEPTUS MECHANICUS OUTPOST WORLD OF CRUCIBLE,
IN ORBIT AROUND THE FIFTH PLANET OF THE ARAKEN
SYSTEM**

THE THUNDERHAWK SHOOK and lurched violently, and the sound of tortured metal echoed through the hold. The gravitational forces pulling at the *Iron Eagle* suddenly doubled. The Thunderhawk was no longer flying, it was dropping.

Iron-Father Gdolkin punched the release stud on his restraining harness and hauled himself out of his seat. Struggling against the immense g-forces that had seized the flyer he staggered towards the cockpit.

'What in the name of Mars just happened?' he bellowed furiously into his helmet vox.

The Iron-Father could have communicated with the helm by vox alone, from his seat, but the leader in him had to see what was going on first-hand. If he was going to die, then he wanted to know what it was that had killed him. An Iron Hand faced his fears; he did not hide from them.

'Starboard engines have been hit, my lord,' a calculus logi informed Gdolkin as the pilot-servitor struggled to keep the plummeting Thunderhawk on course. 'Engines now operating at fifty-three point zero two per cent and dropping.'

'Medusa damn them!' Gdolkin roared, his anger boiling over.

Somewhere above them in the stratosphere the enemy were already in pursuit and firing on them. Gdolkin reached the cockpit and, bracing himself in the entrance hatch, gazed through the armaglas of the windshield.

The world below them was dark and uninviting, not unlike stern Medusa herself. The Iron-Father's targeting eye locked onto jagged peaks rising from a rugged plain of black rock to meet them, tracking from

knife-peak to knife-peak. He didn't know what this outpost world had been like before this whole star system had been enveloped by Warpstorm Araken, but it looked to him as if it had been scoured of what little life might have been here to begin with. To his mind the cracks and fissures in the moon's surface could easily have been made by the great, gouging claws of warp-entities. In fact, as far as Gdolkin could see, there was not one square metre of flat ground anywhere within sight.

The Iron-Father looked to the cable-sprouting servitor hard-wired into the pilot's position in the Thunderhawk. Its metal-laced hands appeared to become the handles of the control stick. The dead features of the drone were twitching in an irregular staccato pattern, its biceps and cable-bundle muscles bulging as it fought against the tremendous forces trying to take control of the craft.

'Will we make the target co-ordinates?' Gdolkin demanded of the calculus logi monitoring the streams of data being relayed to it by the augury-arrays of the *Iron Eagle*.

'No.'

'How long until we land then?'

There was a clang followed by a brief grating sound from beneath the craft. Gdolkin felt the *Iron Eagle* lurch again. It was apparent to him that the Thunderhawk had just scraped the top of one of the forest of rocky needle crags that rose from the surface of the moon like crystalline spires. The warp only knew what kind of an environment had caused the erosion of these rocks into their present jagged needle-form.

'At our current velocity, thirteen point seven-six-two seconds.'

Gdolkin didn't need to bother asking for a damage report; the ship was doomed anyway. This would be the last flight of the *Iron Eagle*.

'Gdolkin to all Iron Hands. Brace for impact!'

There was no time for the Iron-Father to return to his seat; instead he braced his arms against the sides of the cockpit access hatch.

With a synapse impulse Gdolkin changed channels to communicate with the three Mechanicus shuttles making the descent with them.

'Gdolkin to Thule. We are going down. I suggest you land before you too are hit.'

There was no immediate response to his message. Had it got through, he wondered?

'Ten seconds and counting,' the logi said with dispassionate calm, as if the half-human calculating machine was unaware of its own imminent demise, or simply didn't care.

There was certainly no time for the combat servitors the *Iron Eagle* carried to be deployed. There wasn't even time for Assault Squad Dagan to launch.

'Eight.'

There was only time left to pray.

'Ferrus Manus hear our call! Ommissiah help us! Emperor save us!'

'Five.'

Gdolkin could see the jagged black needles rushing up to meet them. Electricity sparked from the connections around the pilot's half-metal head.

'Four. Three. Two. One.'

The *Iron Eagle* hit the surface of Crucible travelling in excess of three hundred kilometres per hour, the nose section crumpling. Iron-Father Gdolkin was hurled forwards through the already splintering armaglas windshield and clear of the crash-site as a spear of rock entered the cockpit, its tip pulping the calculus logi's head. An electrical fire broke out in the cockpit, consuming the seat-locked pilot.

FORMING HIMSELF INTO as tight a ball as he could manage, Gdolkin rolled another twenty metres, away from the wrecked Thunderhawk, the abrasive rocks grazing paint from his armour.

The Iron-Father got unsteadily to his feet. With a thought-impulse he tested his servo-arm and after some initial whirring protests discovered to his relief that it was still operational. He had his bolt pistol locked inside its leg-holster and his power axe was secure in its scabbard on his back.

He looked around him. Thirty metres away lay the smoking wreckage of the *Iron Eagle*. Beyond it was a black plain of jagged volcanic rock, featureless other than for the stalagmite-like spears thrusting up from its rugged surface. At the distant edge of the horizon a low mountain range was visible. Beyond that the sky was cloudless and clear, and black - on this, the dark side of the moon - the image of the void laid out before Gdolkin as if he were the Emperor himself gazing upon all His great works.

The one thing that dominated the dome of space above him was the massive orb of the bloated green gas giant. Between Crucible and its parent celestial body Gdolkin could make out the drifting shadow-shapes of the asteroids snared in orbit around the moon, along with the lifeless husks of those spacecraft that had been lost to the Araken Anomaly over thousands of years.

Beyond all of that the oblivion-black void was dotted with pinpricks of light that spoke of other stars, other worlds in the Emperor's galaxy-spanning realm. Wisps of amethyst and scarlet dust clouds still streamed outwards from the very edges of the Crucible system as the last of the warpstorm's unnatural energy dissipated and the Araken Anomaly died at last.

So this is Crucible, Gdolkin thought.

BROTHER-APOTHECARY CADUCEUS dropped down from the hole torn in the rear portion of the fuselage of the Thunderhawk and, followed by the rest of the Iron Hands' force, made for the shelter of one of the outcropping crags that littered the volcanic plain, Caduceus glanced back at the wreckage of the *Iron Eagle*. The Thunderhawk's portside wing had been sheared off as it collided with a taller crag, and its undercarriage was a buckled mess. The crew compartment, however, had remained intact, although its rear section had been wrenched open.

Shielded against any potential subsidiary blast from the *Iron Eagle*, should the Thunderhawk's damaged engines or fuel tanks explode, Caduceus carried out a swift head count. All of the twenty-one Iron Hands' warriors who had boarded the Thunderhawk for Crucible were accounted for, other than Iron-Father Gdolkin himself.

Hearing the tortured scream of attitude thrusters Caduceus looked up at the descending Mechanicus shuttles. The three craft were still several hundred metres away. He could see their rockets flaring, slowing their rapid descent.

'Form up,' the Apothecary commanded. 'Be ready to move as soon as the Mechanicus are down and have disembarked.'

Under normal circumstances it would have been Librarian Melchor who would have taken command in the absence of Iron-Father Gdolkin. But Melchor was not the man he had once been, following the ordeal he had endured during the psychic storm. He was now a shell of his former self.

Caduceus had ministered to Melchor himself as the *Ajax* had made passage through the newly uncovered system to Crucible. Melchor was fit enough to fight at his brother Iron Hands' side - to do such a thing was as instinct to a veteran warrior of the Adeptus Astartes - but his dreadful, powerful intellect and psyker powers appeared to have left him, at least for the time being. He was like a shell-shocked Guardsman, apparently numb to all around him.

It pained the Apothecary to see the Librarian like this just as it was strange to see him without his attendant cherub-familiar. The homunculus had been fried to a crisp by the warp energy that had burst from Melchor as the psychic ghost-storm ravaged his mind.

There was a dull *crump* high above that drew Caduceus's mind back to the drama unfolding on Crucible. One of the shuttles had been hit. The body of the craft was opened by an expanding orange ball, like a flower blossoming in spring. Then the roar of the explosion reached the Iron Hands.

The fireball of the dying shuttle hurtled closer and closer, burning its trail onto the Apothecary's retinas.

'Move!' Caduceus yelled. The shuttle was on the same dying flight path that the *Iron Eagle* had followed.

Power armour servos strengthening and accelerating the already formidable speed of the Space Marines, the Iron Hands' force ran clear of the crag, Assault Squad Dagan taking to the air as was their predilection.

The shuttle hit five seconds later, showering the surrounding area to a distance of fifty metres away from the point of impact with flying stone chips and chunks of burning wreckage.

Brother Alculus of Sergeant Braxus's Devastator squad and the jump pack-equipped Brother Csarte were both injured by shrapnel, being hit in the back and shoulder respectively, but neither of their injuries would stop them from playing their part in the inevitable conflict to come.

Caduceus watched as the remaining two Mechanicus shuttles made moonfall a hundred metres away. Until their passengers disembarked, the Iron Hands had no way of knowing whether Magos Thule had been aboard the craft that had been destroyed.

If the magos was lost, and with Iron-Father Gdolkon missing too, there would be little hope of finding the Tomb of the Ironclad and uncovering the secrets it might hold.

In nervous anticipation, Caduceus led the Iron Hands to the shuttles' landing site, keeping an ever-watchful eye on the panorama of the night sky above. There were clusters of lights moving in the firmament above them, becoming ever more clearly defined, getting ever closer. The forces of Chaos were on their tail.

As the Iron Hands reached the Mechanicus landers, ready to join with Magos Thule's entourage, whether the tech-priest were alive or dead, the bulbous craft were already deploying landing ramps and beginning to disgorge their payloads of tech-guard, adepts and servitors.

If Thule were dead then the Iron Hands and their allies would make their last stand here. If they were not to claim Crucible's prize for themselves, then the Emperor's purpose for them here was to stop the Arch-Fiend's armies from taking it and putting it to their own foul, blasphemous purpose.

'Gdolkin to Iron Hands,' a gruff voice crackled over the comm in Caduceus's helmet. 'Are you receiving me?'

The Apothecary felt relief wash through him. At least one of the leaders of their mission had survived the gauntlet created by the approaching Chaos forces.

'Caduceus to Gdolkin,' he voxed back. 'Well met, Iron-Father.'

The Apothecary could see Gdolkin moving towards their position now, through the jutting crags dotting the plain. 'Are my warriors ready to move?'

'They are, but our allies, as yet, are not.'

Gdolkin muttered something unintelligible, and possibly heretical, about Magos Thule under his breath that was lost in a burst of static. Something seemed to be interfering with short-range communications. Caduceus briefly wondered how effective long-range vox would be.

THE IRON-FATHER STOOD next to the crash-site himself now. Trapped inside the Thunderhawk, Gdolkin's bodyguard were now just so much dead flesh and twisted scrap metal. The blazing wreckage of the shuttle and the smoking ruin of the *Iron Eagle* signalled their position as clearly as any homing beacon to the descending Chaos forces. As long as the Imperial troops stayed out in the open they were an easy target. Gdolkin had to get the party moving so that when the inevitable attack did come they could at least fight it off and maybe even reach the Tomb of the Ironclad before the

enemy did. They could not come this far, be this close to finding the resting place of the Primarch Ferrus Manus himself, and fail now. Failure was not an option. As one of the Imperial commanders had once said, Gdolkon recalled from the wealth of trivial information stored in his mimetic memory engrams, Victory needs no explanation; defeat allows none.'

They couldn't be too far away from the Tomb, Gdolkon thought, considering Thule had given them the coordinates that he believed matched those of the Mechanicus outpost on Crucible. With the arrival of the Word Bearers' battleship, the *Ajax* had not had time to make a full sensor sweep of the moon. They had had to rely on the information Thule had culled from endless esoteric scrolls and data-slates, half-myths and legends uncovered in dusty archivum the length and breadth of the Imperium. But at least now that the final piece of the tech-priest's puzzle had been found and found to fit, everything else did appear to be falling into place, just as he had said it would.

And yet, once again, it was the magos who was impeding the Iron-Father's plans. His warriors were ready to depart but the tech-priest's entourage were still alighting from the two remaining shuttles. With each precious second that passed the Chaos host were descending on the moon to claim the prize buried here for themselves. Gdolkon could not - would not - let them take it from him.

'Gdolkon to Thule!' the Iron-Father voxed angrily. There was a moment's silence, then, 'Thule here.' The tech-priest's tone sounded as irritable as the Iron-Father's. 'We must hurry.' Gdolkon commanded, 'or all could be lost!'

'You do not need to impress upon me the urgency of the situation, Iron-Father.' Thule snapped back. 'I am fully aware of need for haste under the circumstances. Do you think I want to lose Crucible's prize?'

There was a grating, rumbling sound and Gdolkon looked towards the open disembarkation hatch of the second shuttle, as the last of Thule's tech-guard contingent emerged from the first landing craft. The front section of some sort of tank or armoured personnel carrier began to emerge from the shadows of the cavernous mouth of the shuttle's open door. It looked to Gdolkon as though it was based on a Mark IV Saturn-pattern Chimera chassis.

Then the vehicle emerged fully from the payload hold.

Gdolkin stood looking agog. Even though the tech-priest could not see the Iron-Father's features behind the mask of his helmet he obviously knew how astonished the Iron-Father would be.

'The Emperor did not make me a warrior as he did you, Gdolkin, so I had to do it myself.'

The hooded magos appeared to be sitting atop the small Chimera chassis but when the Iron-Father looked closer below the waist Thule's body seemed to become part of the tank; he was not simply standing up in the command hatch. Either side of him was a servitor hard-wired into a heavy bolter emplacement. At the rear of the vehicle two more drones were plugged into the machinery of a lascannon and a multi-melta. An elite squad of crimson-uniformed tech-guard escorted the magos-tank from the shuttle, their personal augmetics almost as obvious as those of the Iron Hands in some cases.

The whole effect made Magos Omega Thule look like he had transformed into some kind of gun-toting cybernetic centaur. There was something about the tech-priest's new appearance that made Gdolkin think of the Destroyer machines of the soulless necrontyr.

With a screaming roar, a bolt of intense magnesium-white laser light impacted against the volcanic surface of the plain, sending shards of crystal-sharp black rock flying into the air around them. The Chaos landers were almost on them.

'What are we waiting for, Iron-Father?' Thule asked, his voice amplified by speakers in the Chimera body so that it could be heard over the screeching of the heavy las fire. 'Let us make haste.'

Fuming inside, Gdolkin gave the order and the party set off, the Iron Hands interspersed amongst the tech-priest's entourage.

There were twenty-one Sons of Medusa, fifty tech-guard, two dozen robed, shuffling adepts of various specialised orders and an equal number of servitors, many having been given heavy duty combat capabilities. Another forty of the magos's servants had been wiped out in the crash.

With the flaring attitude jets of the Chaos landing boats visible above and streaks of laser energy hammering down into the broken rock of the plain around them, the combined Iron Hands and Adeptus Mechanicus force set off at speed away from the crash-site towards the Tomb of the Ironclad.

They had to keep going now, for the prize awaited. Whatever else happened, Iron-Father Gdolkin's Iron Hands had to ensure that it did not fall into the corrupting hands of the Word Bearers.

* * *

'ENEMY CLOSING AND charging weapons again,' a bridge-thrall reported.

'Maintain current speed and heading.' Strake commanded, his tone stern and unwavering.

Yet another wailing alarm began to reverberate throughout the bridge of the strike cruiser.

'Collision warning,' a monotone servitor voice informed the *Ajax's* commander, an accompaniment to the strident proximity alarm. 'Six seconds to impact.'

'Hold it. Hold it.' Strake muttered, his voice low, as if only addressing himself.

The asteroid practically filled the main viewscreen now, a colossal grey spinning rock sporting its own mountainous crags, deep crevasses and the crater marks of impacts from other, smaller pieces of space debris.

'Prepare to come to the new heading on my mark.'

'Three seconds.'

'Enemy weapons firing.'

'Mark!'

At the Iron-Captain's command, servitors and thralls carried out the operations they had been charged with in a split second. The cruiser's plasma drives fired and the beak of the *Ajax* dipped under the leading edge of the asteroid.

In the same instant the Chaos vessel's laser lances fired. On the first occasion they had hit. This time, however, the *Ajax* was too quick. Devastating laser blasts pounded the asteroid. With a cataclysmic explosion, the laser beams blew the space rock apart, the shockwave throwing shards weighing as much as the strike cruiser itself out into the close-packed mass of the asteroid field.

The *Ajax* shook and lurched violently as smaller rocks crashed into its void shields, and in places where the shields had been weakened by the

Corrupter's previous attacks, into its hull, sending the cruiser careering to port.

But the Iron-Captain was ready, his gravitic assembly allowing him to maintain his position whilst others were thrown across the nave-bridge, and thanks to his clear instructions, the *Ajax* was brought back under control before it could collide with another of the deadly drifting asteroids. A frozen mass of ice and rock sailed past the port weapons batteries, moving between the two spacecraft.

'Damage report!' Strake demanded.

'Portside shields operating at thirty-seven per cent,' a monotone senator reported. 'Hull breaches on decks seven, thirteen and seventeen. Comms array tertius no longer functioning.'

'Engines?'

'Still at seventy-six point seven per cent of maximum operational capability,' another tech-thrall informed the captain.

The *Corrupter's* first lance battery blast had caused some damage to the reactor chambers, which had leaked coolant into the vacuum of space before the area had been sealed off. The Omnissiah had been looking upon the *Ajax* with favour, however, for the damage not to have been more crippling or catastrophic.

'And the enemy?'

'Superficial damage to the hull and dorsal weapon emplacements. Torpedo tubes and laser lances still fully operational.'

Consternation furrowed the human half of Strake's head as he hovered in front of the command pulpit. They were playing a deadly game of cat-and-mouse with the Chaos battleship. The *Corrupter* might have the bigger guns and the better armour but the strike cruiser was faster and more manoeuvrable, particularly within the whirling warren of the asteroid belt circling the moon of Crucible.

It would take a miracle, or a very lucky strike, for the *Ajax*, in its wounded state, to actually bring down the gore-coloured leviathan. But as long as Iron-Father Gdolk's Iron Hands and Magos Thule's forces were operational on the world rotating slowly beneath them, Iron-Captain Lucius Strake would do his best to keep the Chaos vessel on the run and out of reach. That way he would be ready to recover the Space Marines and their allies at a moment's notice, and take the rescued prize - perhaps even the Light-bringer himself - back to the Medusa.

On the viewscreen before Strake a pair of enormous asteroids collided a mere fifty kilometres from the Astartes vessel. As the two rocks spun apart, trailing splinters of ice and minerals, the Iron-Captain gave the command and the *Ajax* powered forwards through the opening gap, the super-heavy *Corrupter* coming onto a new heading behind them.

And so the game would continue.

As the *Ajax* put more and more distance between itself and the Word Bearers' vessel, Strake considered the outcome of the primary attack on the Iron Hands' ship.

'Has there been any word from Sergeant Vincien?' he asked an attendant thrall wearing the customary black robe of a serf of the Iron Hands' Chapter, a comms-set hung from a harness in front of his chest hard-wired directly into his left ear. 'Are we rid of our invaders yet?'

'There has been no word yet, my lord captain,' the comms-thrall communicated, his voice hissing with background static.

'Then the *Ajax* is not out of danger yet.'

WITH A FURIOUS scream Sergeant Vincien brought his chainsword down, putting all the might of his genetically enhanced physique as well as the full power of his artificial right arm into the blow, the grinding blade meeting resistance as it struck the armour beside the shoulder plate guarding the Word Bearer's left arm. Screaming, the chainblade sawed through the ancient ceramite and the corrupted flesh beneath, a fountain of viscous black ichor spraying from the wound into the Iron Hand's face, obscuring his vision through the visor of his helmet.

Bellowing foul litanies of exultation to the powers of Chaos even with his dying breath, before Vincien silenced him by forcing the embedded chainsword up into the traitor's lungs and vocal chords. The Word Bearer crumpled and fell to the blood-slicked floor of the passageway.

Only three of the Word Bearers now remained. The traitorous devotees of Lorgar had fought with the zeal of the converted, setting about them with bayonet-bladed boltguns, desecrated with soldered Chaos sigils and ornamented with leering daemon faces.

The Word Bearers had also brought black-bladed combat knives to bear, clearly relishing the brutality of hand-to-hand combat, preaching the vile word of their fell patrons with every blow they laid against the loyalist Space Marines.

But the Iron Hands themselves had retaliated with all the energy of enraged wild animals. They drowned out the sinful heresies assaulting their ears with valiant battle-cries of their own.

One of the three Word Bearers still standing was clearly the leader of the boarding party. He was larger than the others and fought with an unnatural vigour. The curled horns of his daemon-visored helm rose more grandly than those of his fellows and his armour itself, the colour of dried blood, was wet with glistening symbols, daubed in congealing blood that made the sergeant's gorge rise in his throat.

The second Chaos-brother stood out because his helmet had no horns at all. Instead, the faceplate of his helmet had been fashioned into a snarling fang-filled maw and in the centre of his chest a fire-mouthed daemon head was raised from the ceramite of his armoured suit.

The greaves and shoulder plates of the last of the trio were etched with sacrilegious verses, corrupted from the litanies of the Imperial creed. There were yet more of the debased cants written in ink of a rusty hue - for the pen that had written those vile words had been dipped in blood - nailed to the Word Bearer's armour. This one growled like a barely-controlled beast. In stark contrast to his dark brethren, not one intelligible word of devotion to the daemon-gods, or otherwise, had passed his twisted lips.

Three of Vincien's own tactical squad were down. Brother Yergen, the least experienced of the battle-brothers, had been the first to be felled by the zealous Word Bearers. Corrupted bolter fire had blasted open his helmet. As of now Vincien didn't know if the young Iron Hand was alive or dead.

Shion had fallen next, gutted by a bayonet-blade, the subsequent bolter fire obliterating his insides and killing him.

Brother Betorin's damaged bionic leg had done for him. He had not been able to move quickly enough to evade a swing from a Chaos chainblade. He might live yet, if Vincien could get him help in time.

So it was that three Iron Hands faced off against three of the Chaos Powers' most devoted warriors. Their fervour and warped faith could move mountains, but it would not be enough in the face of the furious rage of the Sons of Ferrus, Sergeant Vincien would make sure of it.

'For Ferrus Manus and Medusa!' he roared tugging his chainsword free of the corpse of his last heretical victim and raising it above his head,

ready to see the Emperor's justice served against these blasphemous traitors to the Imperial creed. 'Warriors of iron, onward and upward!'

THE IMPERIAL FORCE HAD been moving at a forced march for only fifteen minutes when the Raptors attacked. They came at the Iron Hands and their allies out of the black sky like shrieking daemons, vox-speakers in their gargoyle-shaped helmets broadcasting their screeching, bloodcurdling cries all around, the hellish bird screams rebounding from rocks and boulders, drowning out even the staccato fire of the Raptors' boltguns.

There were ten within the daemoniac flock, brazen birds of prey swooping down on the Space Marines and Thule's tech-entourage, a precursor of the Chaos host that were in pursuit. Although part of the Word Bearers' host, the Raptors' loyalties transcended those of any one Traitor Legion. They were unlike any other Chaos-worshipping cult of corrupted Marines. They were a rare breed, millennia of swooping and soaring in the burning skies over the scarred, bleeding plains, foetid plague jungles and rivers of molten fire of those worlds claimed by the daemon princes of the Chaos having changed them irrecoverably. '

These were Chaos Marines who were devoted to the extreme sensations of speed and death-defying plummeting dives, in some ways akin to the extreme sensationalist pleasure-seekers of the Prince of Perversion. They were something less even than the other already inhuman Traitor Marines and yet something more than the mindless daemoniac beasts that soared through the burning skies of the daemon worlds where the laws of physics no longer applied. They were more akin to capricious, short attention-spanned avians than they were to the Space Marines that their gene-seed had originally made them.

One hundred lifetimes ago the few of those sons of the Emperor equipped with jump packs - a technology still in its infancy - who had broken their oaths to humanity and sided with the Arch-Heretic Horus, had fled to their dark masters within the Eye of Terror, and flocked together - no matter to which Legion they might have originally belonged - united by the thrill of the hunt.

The chase was all to them. Through it they lived on the edge of sensory euphoria, exhilarating in the swooping dives, rocketing daemoniac flight and the thrill of accelerating at speed towards the ground, only to pull out

of their death-plunge in the last instant. Without the hunt they felt nothing but agony, locked within a shell that deprived them of the sensory stimulus that lifted their blackened souls to the heights of euphoric ecstasy. The Raptors lived in a state of ecstatic insanity. Without the thrill of the hunt feeding them the adrenaline overdose their bodies had become addicted to, they lived in a state of tortured, sensory deprived madness.

In moments, the Iron Hands had their weapons trained on the attacking avian assault Marines. Several among the technomagos's train of tech-adepts had lost their minds. The screaming bird-cries and terrible appearance had been enough to break them, before the Raptors fell on them with rending talons and cruel hacking axes.

Gdolkin was inured to all kinds of horrors after two centuries of holding back the tide of the Emperor's enemies that would see the glorious Imperium of Mankind overturned. But many of Thule's more sheltered servants were not.

The terrified tech-adepts panicked and ran, and many of the tech-guard were so startled, or downright terrified in the face of the Raptors' attack, that they were of no use in the defence of the rest of the party either.

'Curse these weakling fools!' Gdolkin swore.

Had he not felt that their presence here amongst the magos's Mechanicus force served some higher purpose, he would have gunned them down as they ran. And he still might.

One of the bronze-beaked creatures dropped like a stone into the confused rabble of terrified adepts. There was a strangled scream and then the daemoniac roar of a jet pack as the Raptor took to the air again, a futilely struggling robed adept clutched in its taloned feet.

When it had climbed to a height of at least a hundred metres, in a matter of mere seconds, the Raptor released the tech-adept with a screech of exalted delight. Arms and legs flailing hopelessly, the man let out a shrill scream as he plunged to his death, until the pitiful, spine-chilling cry was silenced on impact with the jagged spikes of rock littering the ground.

It was immediately apparent to the Iron-Father that the airborne Raptors had the advantage over the majority of the ground-trapped Iron Hands. Devastator Squad Braxus acted on instinct, the Marines training their weapons on the swooping bronze forms of the avian creatures.

'Sergeant Braxus!' Gdolkin shouted over the haunting screeches of the Raptor Marines. 'When you are ready...?'

'Samson and Zuriel with me.' Gol Braxus commanded. 'Let's hit them, and hit them hard!'

The missile launcher, heavy plasma gun and las-cannon fired in quick succession. There was a shriek from an eagle-faced Raptor as Braxus's blessed missile hit the traitor's archaic jump pack a glancing blow. It was enough. The warp-charged jump pack failed catastrophically, the Chaos Marine plummeted to the ground, its thrusters trailing fire but providing no propulsion whatsoever. Another of the Raptors did not even have time to react as Zuriel's las-blast hit, blowing it apart in the dazzling nova of an explosion.

Realising the danger that they were in from the longer-ranged, more powerful weapons of the Iron Hands' Devastator squad, the Raptor flock swept in low over the throng of running tech-adepts and wildly firing crimson-uniformed Guardsmen. Through a combination of clawing talons, their own bolt pistol fire and the scything blades of their Chaos-consecrated swords and axes the remaining eight Raptors accounted for the loss of eight tech-guard, three more adepts of the Machine God and three combat-pattern servitors.

Meanwhile the Iron Hands and those amongst Thule's retainers who had kept their wits about them - or that were programmed to do so - returned fire. The weapon-drones that formed part of the magos's personal battle-transport brought down another of the flame-winged assault Marines, whilst Sergeant Dagan's squad launched and brought the fight to the traitor bird-men, grappling with the screeching inhuman creatures in close combat.

But all the time that they were battling the Raptor pack, the terrified rabble of Thule's entourage continued getting in the way of the superior Iron Hands, much to the Iron-Father's annoyance, Gdolkin's liberation force being slowed by the harrying Raptors. The rest of the Chaos horde would be getting nearer all the time. Soon they would be on their heels.

Gdolkin did not want to admit to any weakness on the part of the Space Marines, but if his severely depleted force did not reach the Tomb of the Ironclad before the Word Bearers' host caught up with them, they would be hard-pushed indeed to successfully complete their quest.

The Raptors were certainly persistent; there was no scaring them away by eliminating the greater proportion of their squad. The Iron Hands would

have to bring down every last one of them before they would desist from their given task.

The Iron-Father was suddenly aware of a high-pitched screeching getting closer and closer. He looked up, his augmetic ocular implant immediately taking a lock on the swooping fiend. The daemon-bird face of the Raptor's mutated helmet screamed at him, ruby eyes blazing with malevolent hatred. The creature was only metres away from him.

Iron-Father Gdolkin hefted his power weapon, its curved blade shimmering with the coruscating blue electrical discharge of its force-field.

'For Ferrus!' he bellowed and swung the axe.

GDOLKIN LOOKED UP at the towering cliff-face in front of him. It was at least two hundred and fifty metres to the natural rocky rampart of the sheer rock wall, which meant that the massive doors had to be over a hundred metres tall and the portal they sealed fifty metres across. The doors appeared to be constructed from huge plates of plasteel-reinforced adamantium, and the Omnissiah alone knew how thick they were. However, the Iron-Father suspected that they could endure a direct laser barrage from a ship in orbit.

Across the face of both doors was emblazoned an enormous effigy of the totem of the Cult Mechanicus, emblem of the Omnissiah itself the Machine Opus. The skull-robot visage must have been thirty metres in diameter.

In spite of what followed on their heels, the Iron-Father felt awed in the presence of the almighty effigy. No one had set eyes on this image of the Omnissiah in thousands of years. They were the first since the world of Crucible had been lost to the warpstorm. And the grim expression of the cyborg death's-head said to Gdolkin that whatever else might have happened on this world, whatever unknowable forces had ravaged it, this place was still the preserve of the Machine God of Mars and no power in the universe could change that.

Gdolkin's hearts skipped a beat. As such, it was the perfect place to form the resting place of the Breaker of Darkness, the ironhanded Primarch Ferrus Manus himself. And there was another factor that made his soul soar with anticipated joy. Either side of the great portal stood two immense statues. The one to the left was a sculpture of the Cult

Mechanicus personified in the form of one of the Titan war machines of the Adeptus Titanicus. The one to the right was that of a Space Marine, standing an impressive twenty metres tall, just like the god-engine effigy.

The insignia visible on the left shoulder plate of the colossus looked not unlike that of the Iron Hands' Chapter but varied in one very distinct way: the iron gauntlet was formed into a clenched fist.

Was this some archaic variation of the Iron Hands' own heraldry, or was it evidence of some forgotten successor Chapter of the original, much larger, Iron Hands' Legion, that Iron-Father Gdolkkin had no knowledge of having been omitted from the Chapter's histories for some reason? Could it be that an honour guard of the Iron Hands had borne the primarch's body here in the aftermath of the Horus Heresy?

This must be the Tomb of the Ironclad; Gdolkkin was sure the answers to his questions lay within. Here certainly was evidence of the ancient bond forged between the Sons of Medusa and the Technomagi of Mars, the Space Marines and Cult Mechanicus standing side-by-side to protect the treasure that Crucible had kept hidden for so many centuries.

Gdolkkin held the haft of his axe tightly in his right hand as the combined expeditionary force approached the colossal doors that formed the gateway to the secrets of the ancients.

The Iron Hands, poorly assisted by their tech-army allies, had fought off the Raptors' attack, but it had cost the Imperial forces dearly in terms of men and time. Only another kilometre on from the location of their encounter with the Raptor vanguard of the Word Bearers' army, the volcanic plain had dropped down into a dark and desolate valley. No vegetation grew here either. Ahead of them the cliff-face of a plateau rose up from the scarred surface of the moon, like the mesa mountain hiding the Bei'bul Stone on Herod. Dotting the plain before the mountain wall were ruinous metal forms of towering gantries and other gargantuan constructs. Truly this had been a place where the Adeptus Mechanicus had wrought great works.

And they stood here now in the face of such magnificence that it filled Gdolkkin's heart with joyful ecstasy, renewed the desire boiling within him to complete their mission and made him want to shout hymns of praise to the Emperor and the Omnissiah for all their blessed, bounteous gifts.

The Iron Hands stood in the shadow of the cliff-face staring up at the portal and the two statues. They could hear the ululating cries and

blasphemous chants of the advancing Chaos host behind them. It did nothing to dishearten the Iron-Father. It merely filled him with a furious zeal so that he wanted to make his stand here, at the entrance to this sacred place, and never let the corrupted Legionaries sully the Tomb of the Ironclad with their accursed taint.

'How much longer, priest?' the Iron-Father asked, his voice heavy with foreboding.

The magos's tank had come to a stop before the massive doorway. A snaking mechadendrite connected the tech-priest to an open panel at the base of the portal. Thule's eyes - both organic and bionic - were closed as if he were asleep or in an attitude of prayer.

A grimace twisted his deformed lips on hearing the Iron-Father's words.

'You must learn patience, Iron-Father,' the magos hissed, the lid of his one human eye squeezing even more tightly shut.

'And you should learn the meaning of urgency, priest,' came Gdolkin's automatic callous retort. 'Too many years of life have distorted your perception of time.'

Thule opened his mouth to speak but said nothing.

The gathered Space Marines and tech-entourage dared not say anything either. The hoots and declamations of the advancing Chaos host echoed from the cliff-face.

There was an audible click from within the workings of the access panel followed by a grinding, whirring sound.

'There. It is done,' the magos said, letting out his breath in a heavy sigh, as if the concentration he had just employed to decrypt the door lock's operational algorithms had cost him physically as well. The mechadendrite disconnected with a hiss and retracted into the recesses of Thule's robes.

With a great, grating groan, the massive adaman-tium doors yawned open. Beyond, all was darkness.

'In!' Gdolkin commanded.

Suit lamps were activated, the tech-guard switched on their gun-mounted torches switched on and sweeping spotlights blazed into phosphorescent life on the front of Thule's tank transport.

A vanguard formed of Command Squad Melchor, now led by Iron-Father Gdolkin himself, and Tactical Squad Erastus, led the way into the cavernous halls beyond the mighty doors. The Thule-tank trundled over

the threshold followed by the rest of the tech-priest's retainers. Behind them came the rearguard of the remaining two squads of Iron Hands, Assault Squad Dagan and Devastator Squad Braxus, covering the Imperial force's rear as they took their first tentative steps into the Tomb of the Ironclad.

The mindless servitors were the only ones not to express any emotion on entering the long-sealed vault of the Mechanicus outpost. Audible gasps issued from the mouths of the Mechanicus cultists and Space Marines, as well as exclamations to the Omnissiah and prayers of thanksgiving cast up to the Emperor.

The silence of the tomb and the reverie of the moment was shattered by a whistling roar and the rambling detonation of an impact only metres from the entrance to the underground complex.

'Thule, we have to get those doors closed again, now.' Gdolkin said.

'Calm yourself, Iron-Father,' the tech-priest said. 'I have the situation entirely under control.'

As if on cue, the massive doors began to grind shut again, as the last of Squad Braxus crossed the threshold of the vaulted portal. There was another whistling *crump* and then the clamorous noise of the Chaos host was silenced as the doors slammed shut with a dull boom that echoed along vaulted halls for a good thirty seconds as the reverberations disappeared into the distance of the colossal labyrinthine tomb.

With the mighty doors closed behind them, this would buy the Imperial force some time, allowing the Iron Hands and Magos Thule's party to explore the Mechanicus sepulchre beyond more fully, without interruptions. They would be able uncover the secrets of the Tomb of the Ironclad and, more importantly, they would reach the prize first.

THE IRON HANDS and the entourage of Magos Omega Thule made their way further and further into the Tomb of the Ironclad, following the vaulted, wide ceremonial pathways - wide enough for several tanks to pass along side by side in triumphal formation - that led them deeper and deeper into the bedrock of the moon. The ceiling of the vast space was one hundred metres away and was barely touched by the lights of the advancing explorers. The sound of their footsteps on the ferrocrete floor, and the rumbling of Thule's Chimera transport, were lost within the

sepulchral halls. A smell lingered here, the musty smell of antiquity and death.

Other equally impressive, vaulted passageways led off from the central one that the band were following, but the tech-priest directed them to remain on their current course, the precious information that he had so obsessively gathered over the centuries proving its worth at last.

As they advanced they passed great alcoves in which stood yet more statues of notable tech-priests and valiant Space Marine heroes timeless in their aspect, frozen in attitudes of prayer and heroic poses. The statues of the Astartes all bore the same iron fist insignia on their armoured bodies.

Iron-Father Gdolkon felt dwarfed and humbled in the presence of those who had carried the primarch here after the battle on Istvaan V, to recover from his mortal wounds, even if they were only in statue form. Banners of ancient cloth, twenty metres long, hung from the cold stone walls, bearing the personal heraldry of a hundred different commanders and campaigns, the names of some existing now only in legend. Others had been forgotten by the archivists of the Imperium altogether.

And yet Anatoslus Gdolkon would be the Iron-Father remembered for breaching the Tomb of the Ironclad and restoring the primarch to the bosom of the Chapter that had been founded from the very fibre of his being.

Ferrus Manus was here, somewhere, Gdolkon could feel it - in the filaments of his bionic implants, in the gene-enhanced blood pulsing in his veins, in the very core of his being - lying waiting, in stasis-sleep, dreaming of the time when his loyal warriors would be drawn to him, to find him and welcome him back into the Chapter that had been of his making, at the time of the Iron Hands' direst need.

And then, after wandering the cavernous halls of the vast, city-sized, sepulchral underground complex for what seemed like an age, the explorers found the way ahead closed to them. At the end of the vaulted tunnel stood a second set of massive double doors, bearing the skull-like face of the Omnissiah.

An oppressive silence hung over the place, heavy as a shroud of death. No one said anything. Magos Thule accessed the opening mechanism of the doors as before. Gdolkon held his breath.

Three minutes later, the massive portal swung open, and cold, dead air, stale after centuries of incarceration, gusted from the vast space beyond,

like a tempest's dying breath. Gdolkina stepped forward.

They stood at the entrance to a vast columned chamber that stretched away into Stygian darkness. And there for all to see in the sweeping beams of the Iron Hands' illuminators, and the tech-priest's spotlights was the prize the legends spoke of, that had been hidden here, deep beneath the surface of the moon of Crucible for thousands of years.

The sight stole the breath from all who saw it. Here lay the Ironclad, sleeping in sepulchral-stasis; not one warrior but an entire legion. Titans. God-engines of the Adeptus Titanicus. Enough firepower to raze a planet. An army that could turn the tide of the war.

TWELVE

LOST GODS

THE TOMB OF THE IRONCLAD

THE TITAN HANGAR was colossal. Every single one of the warriors and adepts amongst the combined Astartes-Mechanicus force who could give an emotional response was awed by the proportions of it.

The Iron Hands' vanguard, led by the equally dumbfounded Iron-Father Gdolkin, advanced at a slow, stately pace, making cautious progress, as if they did not dare disturb the sanctity of this place, that their very movements might show the reverence they felt in this almighty temple of the Machine God. With every step the Iron Hands, the Astartes Chapter that was the most like the mighty Adeptus Mechanicus itself in its belief system, stared agog at the incredible wonders revealed to them with every sweeping spotlight beam - a looming Titan-form, a cold-eyed skull-helm, a siege cannon-sized arm cannon - although there was always one small part of each Marine's brain alert to any potential danger. They always had half an eye monitoring the information being relayed to their visor displays from sensors built into their ancient power armoured suits, on the lookout for anomalous readings or any sudden movement in this tomb of Titans.

The colossal war engines were arrayed before the Imperial explorers between massive, towering pillars that were fitted with maintenance gantries and other huge tools, so that they looked like statues standing in recessed alcoves. At their summits, the columns disappeared into the gloom of the roof of the cathedral-like vault.

The Iron Hands' suit-beams barely illuminated the rockcrete ceiling. The scale of the place was such that they certainly did not pierce the darkness all the way to the far end of the void of this chamber. In truth, they had no idea of the true size of this sepulchral space.

As the Space Marines looked up into the gloom at the gigantic sinister figures, cones of light traced the greaves of massive legs to armoured adamantium torsos, huge arms bearing enough power to level a city, and up to the sinister helmed heads. The armourglas viewing ports of their eyes were dark pits; no sign of life alight within them.

A deep chill permeated this place. Gdolkon was aware of the cold but it did not trouble him, or any of the other Space Marines. Their advanced metabolisms compensated for it without them having to think about it. The same could not be said for some amongst the tech-priest's small army. Adepts shivered in threadbare sackcloth robes and tech-guard hugged themselves to keep warm, their breath steaming into clouds in the dead air around them.

And there was a distinctive sour smell hanging in the air as well. It was not mustiness, for the cold air of the tomb was dry. It was a smell of ancient metal and decayed lubricants, mixed with the residue of the sickly-sweet incense that the adepts, who had once tended this holy place, had used in their arcane rituals.

It really was as if they were inside a tomb. There was no sign of human life here. In truth, other than for the fact that the place existed at all and the Titans had been waiting here in the sepulchral darkness for endless eons, there was no evidence of human life having ever been here. In their search of the Mechanicus complex, Gdolkon and his fellow Iron Hands and the tech-adepts had not come across any bodies, or their remains. It was possible that over the millennia any bones or other remains would have rotted away completely, but there would have been some residue left behind. But there was no sign of any such deposit, no drifts of dust around the pillar bases, no arachnid webs.

Yet the magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus were notorious for extending their natural lifespans through the liberal implantation of bionics and the use of juvenat treatments. Would such technologies really have been denied those who had built an army of Titans here on Crucible?

So what precisely had happened to the builders of this place, Gdolkon found himself wondering? What manner of apocalyptic event had occurred to wipe any trace of them from this Adeptus Mechanicus outpost? Or was this what absorption by Warpstorm Araken had done to them? Had their restless spirits been amongst those that had assailed the *Ajax* as it had braved the ordeal of the dissipating warpstorm?

Gdolkin's vanguard was advancing along what appeared to be the central aisle of the vaulted crypt - a space big enough to hold a whole army of giants - and yet the amazed explorers had no idea how large that army was.

To either side of them, appearing out of the darkness, thanks to the casting beams of the exploratory party, stood one of the goliath machines of the Titan Legion. And yet beyond each, to both left and right, the party's penetrating beams also just picked out the armoured greaves and weapon-tips of another Titan engine, and still there was no sign to there being an end to the chamber. Another thirty metres on there was another pair of machines with others beyond them as well.

The Space Marines were as demigods among men but compared to these monstrous machines they were no more than insignificant insects.

As his party passed the massive splayed foot of the first Titan to their left, the ends of its steel toes as tall as he was, Gdolkin gazed up at the awe-inspiring form of the god-engine. Just one of these on a battlefield could turn the tide of battle. The Iron-Father instantly recognised the machine as being a Warlord-class land battleship, the largest of the common Titan types and the mainstay of the Adeptus Titanicus Legions.

The scouring torch beams of the buzzing servo-skulls of Thule's party criss-crossed the monstrous solid black shadows of a gatling blaster, as big as a Baneblade super heavy battletank, and a power fist capable of dismembering another Titan or tearing down the walls of any fortress it came up against. Over its right breast a heraldic shield, forged of steel six metres high, proclaimed that this was the *Iron Heart*.

To the right, the Titan was incomplete. The multiple rocket launcher that should have stood in place of its left arm still hung in the chain-cradle of a gantry crane assembly, waiting to be attached, as it had been for centuries. The other arm had already been fully equipped with an imposing laser burner, a close combat weapon. This colossal war machine was a Titan-killer. Its rockets could find its target from a distance whilst the intense energy beam of the laser burner would cause bare metal to vaporise and electrical systems to burn out when the god-beast closed for the kill. A piece of adamantium scrollwork named this Titan as the *Animus Indomitus*.

Various pieces of equipment and other debris lay, as if discarded, at the feet of the looming war machines. There were half-unloaded shell bearing

gurneys and barrels of grease-oil. There were even the relics of what might have been the components of mono-task forklift servitors, but of their fleshy parts nothing remained.

The next pair of war gods were armed with a volcano cannon and chain fist, bigger than the mighty Land Raiders of the Adeptus Astartes, and a plasma cannon as well as another gatling cannon. And beyond them again, other Titans could just be discerned looming out of the moribund darkness. And still the Space Marines had not reached the end of the vast chamber.

Although built according to the design templates of ancient STC designs, each Titan was in reality a unique construction, hundreds of servitors, tech-adepts and engineers labouring for thousands of man hours to create each in turn, lavishing on them the ornamentation and individual detailing deserved of the cybernetic godhead of the Omnissiah incarnate as a living machine of iron and adamantium, forged of the furnaces of the mighty Mechanicus manufactories.

Ever since they had crossed the threshold of the Titan chamber the party had advanced in silence, other than for the tread of ceramite boots, the rattle of slung lasguns, the click and whirr of servitor-drones and the rumbling of the magos's Chimera-chassis. That changed now, however.

'This is incredible!' Thule enthused aloud, unable to contain himself any longer. His voice sounded strangely small and insignificant in the huge space, not even strong enough to carry to the towering pillars and echo back from them. 'There are quake cannons, plasma destructors, melta-cannons, death rays, vortex missile weaponry... such wonders of the Machine God!'

Gdolkon looked up at a skull face cast from iron. His suit-lights gleamed dully in the glass blast-windows of its eye-sockets.

'It is truly an awesome sight, and an awesome discovery,' the Iron Hand confirmed.

'This is a greater prize than I ever could have hoped for! The Omnissiah is truly looking upon our venture with favour, Iron-Father. And to think that the Godhead has chosen to reveal this to me.'

'To us, priest.'

'Of-of course. To us.'

The party moved on. As he advanced, Gdolkon kept one eye on the readings of his suit's signum device. The scanner was counting ten of the

monstrous humanoid war machines within a radius of fifty metres and the Iron-Father had no reason to believe that they stopped there. The signum also told him that as yet, and as far as it could discern, the Chaos host had not yet breached the complex.

Fifty metres further on and the explorers were passing another pair of Titans. These both bore the same heraldry, painted in vivid reds and blues. The quartered colouring had been dulled by the passage of time but Gdolkin could easily imagine that it would still look awesomely threatening to the enemies of the Emperor on a war-ravaged battlefield, and at the same time act as an inspiration to His loyal subjects.

As Gdolkin and the rest of the Iron Hands continued along the broad aisle between the sleeping god-engines, so overwhelming was what they were seeing that the Iron-Father almost felt as if he was becoming inured to the wonder of it all. The Imperium had never needed the Titan legion more than it did now.

One of the Warlords, its broad, armoured shoulders mounted with batteries of high-calibre gun emplacements, had a head made to look like the robot-skull visage of the Machina Opus itself. Another had a massive pair of wings cast into its chestplate armour with the badge of the Adeptus Mechanicus at its centre. Yet another had had its burnished adamantium hull painted with the yellow and black chevrons. One had been painted utterly black, the barrel of its volcano cannon couched like a knight's lance.

Every one of the Titans was different. Every one was a plasma reactor-powered weapon capable of devastating firepower. Every one was a terrifying, vengeful war god in its own right.

In all his years fighting the enemies of the Imperium, and particularly fighting alongside the armies of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Iron-Father Gdolkin had encountered the war engines of the Legionnes Titanicus before, but never in such numbers. There had been the assault on the Black Fortress of Vania, during which the Titans of the Firesword Legion had brought down the walls allowing the Iron Hands into the heart of the place. Those Titans had numbered only twelve, a number which, at the time, had seemed impressive to the younger Gdolkin.

If the enemy were to capture this army, it could make all the difference to the success of the Despoiler's Thirteenth Black Crusade. There was a

whole catalogue of occasions when single Titan Legions had liberated whole worlds from the predations of the enemies of Mankind.

Any prior sense of inurement Gdolkon might have begun to feel evaporated when, after almost half a kilometre, the Imperial force at last reached the far side of the giants' crypt. For a brief second the Iron-Father mistook the columns of the Titan's legs for another set of pillars, like those monolithic structures that supported the distant roof of the chamber.

The Imperator rose above them like the Omnisiah incarnate. It was set back into its own massive recessed maintenance alcove, which was riddled with walkways and runged staircases amidst carved stone gargoyle heads, ten metres high, that projected from the bedrock of the moon that the hangar had been carved from. The massive machine was a giant amongst Titans, dwarfing those others that only topped fifty metres in height; its battlements, bristling with gun emplacements, being seventy metres above the ground.

The battlements of the largest class of Titan ever to be constructed by the genius of the Cult Mechanicus, and fielded in battle by the Adeptus Titanicus, supported gun-towers with spire-like armoured roofs containing autoloaders and void shield generators.

Its tower-like legs were massive, wide structures with tiered cathedral steps formed from the metal of its splayed toes, which led up to the entrance ports of the great machine. These huge armoured pillars, dotted with bolter gun emplacements, were ornamented to an incredibly detailed degree, the work of millions of man-hours lavished on the Titan-engine by those in service of the Machine God of Mars. The legs, made large to support the colossal weight of the Titan, above rose up to piston-linked hip joints as big as static Earthshaker platforms.

The torso of the Titan was covered in armour so thick that it would have not been out of place on a planetary defence installation. More weapon emplacements - autocannon, bolter gun and rocket launcher batteries - could be seen protruding from shadowy arched ports. Slung low between the massively broad shoulders of the Titan was the burnished steel of its knight's-helm head. Above that, of course, rose the fortress battlements of the war machine, with their massive main battery gun, weapon emplacement towers and strategic defence laser turret.

The whole of the Titan's armour had been painted brilliant crimson that reflected the lights of the exploratory party. The exposed mechanical parts

were gleaming gunmetal grey, as was the Emperor's command-helm.

But the articles that demanded the most attention were the Emperor's two colossal weapon arms, each one capable of levelling a city or blitzing a whole armoured company from the face of any battlefield. First there was the Hellstorm cannon of its right arm. Like other barrage weapons, the Hellstorm was most effective when fired into closely grouped targets. A single deadly barrage from the weapon was enough to break an ork clan in one go. The Emperor's plasma annihilator was the ultimate tank-buster and Titan-killer. Volleys from this almighty cannon could pulverise a daemon plague tower or slaughter a tyranid hierodule bio-construct.

Banners bearing further heraldic iconography that described its heraldic lineage were slung from the Emperor's monstrous weapon arms and hung from banner poles on the battlements as well. On a scroll, hand-embroidered onto one of these banners by an army of servitor-seamstresses in letters two metres high, was the name of the god-engine, *Deus Mortem*, or *God of Death* in the vernacular.

Armed with such a huge array of weapons, the *Deus Mortem* was a veritable walking arsenal, the embodiment of brute force. Where the *God of Death* trod, cities burned. Where it cast its gaze, the enemy died in their thousands. And the enemies of the Imperium would do well to fear its world-razing wrath.

Iron-Father Gdolkon stood staring at the monstrous killing machine in stupefied awe, as did the other Space Marines.

Magos Thule was almost hysterical with unalloyed delight.

'This is magnificent! Incredible! Stupendous! It is beyond my wildest imaginings. Oh, Great Omnissiah, I thank you for this wondrous boon you have gifted me!'

The exhilarated magos turned to Gdolkon.

'Iron-Father, now we must work quickly. The Chaos host will work out how to enter the tomb eventually, and we must prepare our own breakout in the face of their zealous blood-frenzy.'

'What do you intend to do, Thule?' Gdolkon asked, his one human eye narrowing suspiciously.

'Why, I intend to wake the Titans, of course.'

'But Thule, there are dozens of them and we have not yet searched the whole chamber and found them all yet.' Or the primarch, the Iron-Father added to himself, casting a glance at his waiting warriors. 'You would need

an entire army of adepts to accomplish such a feat and your vassals number barely enough to activate and run just one of them.'

Thule smiled like a snake and looked to the towering Imperator again. 'One is all I shall need, Iron-Father.'

With a whirring and clacking of detaching mechadendrites and other connecting clamps, the tech-priest extricated himself from the Chimera-chassis of his personal armoured transport.

'Of course, in time, we will need to study the warriors of the Legion more closely to ascertain whether they are fully operable, but for them to be enshrined in this way I would think that they probably are.'

'Can you be sure after so many thousands of years?' Gdolkin challenged. He was as awed and amazed by this discovery as the tech-priest, but what Thule was suggesting seemed incredible beyond belief.

'Iron-Father, what is the matter of a few sparse millennia to an immortal god-engine?' Thule countered. His patronising tone made him sound like he was talking to an ignorant child. 'You should know that Titans are as avatars of the Omnissiah, in the aspect of vengeful gods of war.'

'These ancient war machines are no different; they are gods just like any other Titan. Do not be fooled by the sepulchral nature of this place. They have merely been lost to us. They are not dead. And the Omnissiah has led me to this place, so that I might awaken them.' Thule was in a state of barely-contained ecstasy.

'But the enemy are at the gates of this place. There cannot be much time before the Chaos host carry out some blasphemous ceremony to override the sanctified locking mechanisms of the outer doors.'

'Have no fear, Iron-Father.' Thule said, arms and tentacular mechadendrites indicating the towering giants arrayed all around them, 'we will have an army of these gods of war to fight for our cause. Why, just one of these colossi could lay waste to the entire host ranged against us, no matter what its size. Now, I must be about the holy work I was called here to fulfil.'

Thule strode towards the steps built into the giant Titan's feet, his footsteps clicking on the compacted ferrocrete floor. The huddle of twenty tech-adepts followed in the wake of his sweeping crimson robes, accompanied by the ten mechanical task-slaved senators. Thule's tank

remained where it was, ready to fight alongside the other combat-servitors to protect their master.

Gdolkin turned to the assembled Iron Hands and the tech-guard. Familiar faces looked back at him: Apothecary Caduceus, Sergeant Miel Erastus and poor, lost Librarian Melchor amongst them. Amongst the tech-guard he recognised Captain Skon Thrask from the battle on board the mighty Ordinatus *Gehenna*.

'We must secure this area,' the Iron-Father said. 'An attack by the Word Bearers is inevitable and we must be ready for it. The Beneficent Emperor has decided that it is our fate to make our stand here against those who would see the Despoiler's Thirteenth Black Crusade accomplish its evil goals. Squads Dagan, Erastus and Braxus, I want you to secure the entrance to the hangar. We must hold the enemy back there, not if but when they breach the outer doors of this complex.'

Captain Thrask raised a cautious hand. The tech-guard, although sporting a similar number and variety of augmetics as the Iron Hands, were dwarfed by the two and half metre tall Space Marines, who appeared even larger in their bulky power armour.

Gdolkin nodded to Thrask, indicating that he should ask his question.

'What would you have us do, my lord Iron-Father?'

'Scout the rest of the hangar. Find out precisely how many Titans there are here and assess their battle status.' For we need to know what the Imperium may have to face should the Chaos host win the prize for themselves, he thought. 'Then prepare to sell yourselves dearly for the Omnissiah and the almighty Emperor.'

'Yes, Iron-Father.' Thrask gave the Space Marine commander a slight bow. He and the other tech-guard were truly awed to be in the presence of not only an entire Titan Legion but also the legendary Iron Hands. Gdolkin supposed that their augmetically-enhanced forms must be what the tech-guard aspired to be themselves.

He looked at the still waiting Imperial soldiers.

'You have your orders. Now go.'

As the Space Marine and tech-guard squads spread out through the hangar, Caduceus turned to the Iron-Father.

'And what would you have us do, Gdolkin?' he asked.

The survivors of Command Squad Melchor - the Librarian, his bodyguard Brother Reuban, Caduceus, Banner-bearer Kansbar and Iron-

Brother Ibras - and himself remained; six of the greatest warriors of the Vurgaan clan. Theirs was to be the noblest quest of all.

The primarch had to be here, at the heart of the shrine. It felt right to Gdolkín that Ferrus Manus's resting place should be guarded by an entire Legion of Titan ironclads.

'We still have the true prize to find, brothers. Somewhere the primarch awaits us.'

FURTHER EXPLORATION OF the chamber by divided parties of Iron Hands and tech-adepts revealed there to be other classes of Titan present, as well as the army of Warlords and the magnificent Imperator.

There were the smaller, but no less effective or threatening Warhound scout-class machines, which in the arena of war were the eyes and ears of the Titan Legions. Their high speed allowed them to range far and wide, spying out the movements of the enemy as well as the lay of the land. Their ability to outpace many larger war engines meant that packs of the canine-headed Warhounds made effective flanking forces, sowing the seeds of terror and confusion within the enemy's ranks.

There were also Reaver Battle Titans, their variable configuration allowing them to be tailored to a broad spectrum of battlefield roles. They combined the massed firepower of gatling blasters, laser weapons and rocket launchers with the Titan-hunting volcano cannons and a myriad of close-combat weapon emplacements. They were mighty machines indeed, but not as powerful or resilient as the Warlords, which had formed the backbone of the Titan Legions since the days of the Horus Heresy.

In total there were eighty-one Titans. Thule's adepts and Gdolkín's Marines counted an impressive forty Warlords, three-quarters of them in battle-ready condition, sixteen Warhounds and twenty-four Reavers.

There was only one capital Imperator amongst the whole Legion. To paraphrase Thule, it only needed one.

But there was still no sign of the lost primarch. There was none of the Astartes heraldry present in this goliath chamber. Perhaps the successor Chapter's role had purely been to protect the Titan Legion stationed here, close as Crucible was to the roiling borders of the Eye of Terror. Perhaps elsewhere on this world there were the ruins of the Iron Fists' Chapter house or the wreckage of their land-behemoth monastery-fortress.

Then there was the teleportarium.

IRON-FATHER GDOLKIN stood at the entrance to the spherical chamber. Like everything else in the Tomb of the Ironclad it had been constructed on a titanic scale, including the towering gateway of its entry portal. At the centre of the space inside the sphere, projecting from the flat ferrocrete floor was a circular adamantium dais five metres high, four sets of carved stone steps leading up to it at each point of the compass. At four points equidistant between the four staircases, gigantic capacitor spikes rose to a height of twenty-five metres from a nest of cabling and a conglomeration of esoteric equipment. Suspended from the concave ceiling of the strange spherical chamber was a thick disc of metal linked to yet more cables. Close to the edge of the dais there stood a bank of brass-finished consoles, covered with a thin layer of dust and the greasy green patina of verdigris.

'A teleportarium.' Gdolkín said as he gazed at the archeotechnology built into the centre of the annexe.

Gdolkín had seen such devices before, of course - he had used them on several occasions himself, when bringing the Emperor's light to the enemies of mankind in the heat of planetary assaults or ship-to-ship boarding actions - but he had never seen one of such a massive size before. This teleportarium had obviously been constructed to be large enough to transport the Titan god-engines themselves. Gdolkín had never heard of such a thing before.

Slowly, almost reverentially, the Iron-Father crossed the ferrocrete to the console bank. The beams of the Space Marines' suits reflected back from the smooth curved surface of the inside of the sphere bathing everything in a dull luminescence.

Gdolkín hardly dared admit it to himself - for surely such an admission would be tantamount to admitting to a weakness of faith, maybe even heresy, a lack of trust in the beliefs of his own Chapter - but he was beginning to feel uncertain about finding the final resting place of Ferrus Manus. The discovery of the ancient wonder of the teleportarium chamber distracted him for a moment from any nascent anxieties about the success of his personal quest. It was an appropriate tangent to take to the exploration after all. It was vital that the Space Marines covered every option and knew every possible way out of the tomb, in the eventuality that it might become their tomb too.

The real question was, of course, was it still operational?

Gdolkin took off his helmet and placed it carefully on top of the control console in front of him. For a moment he did nothing more than study the panel arrayed before him, cognitae-implants helping him interpret some of the more eldritch of the Cult Mechanicus technoglyphs adorning the buttons and switches.

It was the natural affinity for machines that Gdolkin had displayed on his induction into the Iron Hands' Chapter, which had dictated his rise through the echelons of the Vurgaan clan to the position of Iron-Father. He had spent years being trained by the secretive Masters of Mars and was renowned throughout the whole Chapter for the level of his artifice. It was why the great clan council had chosen him to aid an agent of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

If there was anyone blessed with the skills of the Techmarine who could reactivate the ancient teleportarium then that man was Anatolus Gdolkin.

He let his gleaming silvered hands drift over the runed switches and dials of what was clearly the main control console. He took a deep breath, feeling the servo-enhancements implanted in his chest filling his superior lungs with the cold, stale air of the tomb, and intoned a prayer to the mighty Ommissiah. Then he set to work.

'MY LORD MAGOS, the plasma reactor is on-line and powering up.'

Thule could hear the joy in the tech-adept's voice.

'Praise be! Thank the Ommissiah!' he said, his own words alive with satisfied bliss.

'We have weapons control,' the bald-headed adept who was in the command cabin's weapons moderati position announced.

'Surveyor auspex calibrating,' another voice said.

Thule surveyed the bridge of the emperor Titan with satisfaction. It was all coming together at last. His researches had not been in vain. When others had dismissed his mission as nothing more than a rogue servitor chase he had persisted in his quest. And now he had been vindicated. It would be he who would be remembered by the Imperial forces and celebrated by the Adeptus Mechanicus as the technomagos whose discovery turned the tide of war and drove the Despoiler's hordes back into the accursed Eye of Terror.

'Void shields?' he enquired.

'Shield generators powering also, lord magos.'

'Excellent.' Thule murmured, his mechadendrite tentacles writhing with reflexive pleasure.

This day would see the servants of the Machine God rise victorious. This day would be theirs.

This day would be *his*.

A DULL DRONING hum began to fill the chamber, sound waves rebounding from the circular walls in all directions, setting up strange null-zones of sound and unsettling harmonics. Gdolkin could feel the console panel vibrating through his metal fingertips. A fine fall of dust was shaken free of the capacitor spikes.

There was a sparking bang and crackling bands of blue-white lightning began to course their way up the energising twenty-five metre-tall pylons.

'You did it, Iron-Father.' Brother Reuban said, patently impressed by Gdolkin's skill.

'Thank the Ommissiah, yes I did,' was Gdolkin's simple reply. 'But it will take some time for the teleportarium to charge to the levels that will permit teleportation.'

'Then we are done here for the time being?' Apothecary Caduceus asked.

'Not yet.' Gdolkin said, his voice hard. 'We still have not found any sign of the primarch's presence on Crucible. There is more to be learnt here.'

'Here? In this chamber?' Caduceus asked, sounding unconvinced.

'Indeed, Apothecary. It would appear that this control console is not only connected to the teleportarium. Somewhere else within this complex there lies a logic engine core that is still operational, even after all these years. Within it are the data-file records of what came to pass here centuries ago.'

'So, if the primarch was truly brought to Crucible by the servants of Mars...' Caduceus began.

'The spirit of the cogitator mind-core will be able to confirm it for us.' Gdolkin finished.

'We are on the verge of a mighty discovers' indeed.'

'This could be the moment of truth, brother, but first I must break the encryption algorithms locking the core-files. Although I can hardly believe that I could say such a thing, would that the priest were here. After the way he opened the tomb, it would not be long before all the secrets of

Crucible were revealed to us. As it is, however, I have a few tricks and adaptations of my own. They might not be as quick as the tech-priest's methods but they should achieve the same result.'

Gdolkin bunched his left hand into a fist. With a high-pitched rapid whine, a gleaming silver spike emerged from the second knuckle of the middle finger, extending to a length of twenty centimetres.

'I only hope that the logister recordings have not been corrupted by the slow passing centuries or by Crucible's long sojourn within the warpstorm.'

Locating a small port in the console Gdolkin slid the spike into it. Closing his remaining human eye, a look of intense concentration creased his features as he attempted to commune with the machine spirit of the cogitator core.

GDOLKIN'S MIND SWAM through the digital sea of the cogitator's mind-core. The sensation was similar to an out-of-body experience. It was as if his whole body was gliding through the outer layers of the thinking-machine's digital consciousness. It was as if he was inside a vast sphere, the interior surface of which appeared to be liquid metal. It changed, chameleonlike, from glistening gold, through burnished bronze and dull grey to mercurial quicksilver.

Frozen images flew past him connected by streams of lingua-technis symbols that even he could not interpret as he travelled deeper into the logic-core. It was as though he were penetrating different layers of stasis-locked information. Some of the pictures appeared blurred or out-of-focus. Some had almost darkened entirely to black, their symbol-connector lines corrupted. Other links were broken entirely, as if some information had been lost altogether.

The cogitator's machine spirit materialized before him, appearing in the Iron-Father's mind's eye as a nebulous red cloud with a tightly focused electrical storm sparking and flashing at its heart. The machine spirit challenged the Iron-Father's right to access its data-files. Gdolkin dredged up the necessary protocol responses from the depths of his mind. It was not only the Adeptus Mechanicus who could reap the benefit of secret knowledge shared in the past thanks to the ancient oaths sworn between the Temple of the Machine and the Iron Hands' Chapter.

The machine spirit acquiesced and the secrets of its millennia old memories were Gdolkin's for the examining.

A whole plethora of images assaulted the Iron-Father's senses as he accessed one long-forgotten data-document after another. Images of armies of tech-priests passing through the huge hallways of the Crucible complex, great clouds of incense-smoke rising from their censers up into the vaulted gloom. Images of mighty forges stamping out pieces of Titan weaponry whilst huge blast furnaces disgorged thousands of tonnes of glowing molten metal. Images of ancient Astartes brothers paying homage to the Machine God, their bolt pistols and chainswords held across their battered chestplates as their chanting voices raised polyphonic hymns of praise and thanksgiving to the heavens.

It was as if he was back on Crucible all those thousands of years ago, before the coming of the warpstorm, before the great disaster.

And in the darkness at the corners of his mind, there was an insistent hissing sound, like whispering voices that couldn't quite be heard clearly...

IRON-FATHER GDOLKIN took a step back from the humming control console, disconnecting the gauntlet data-retrieval spike, which retracted into the augmetic mechanism, and Caduceus saw him physically sag. He had never seen Gdolkin look so dejected, so disheartened. It was as if he had lost all purpose, as if he no longer had any cause to fight for. For all intents and purposes he looked like a broken man.

The Apothecary moved to help him. Hearing Caduceus's approach the Iron-Father turned and opening his eye, held the Apothecary back with a wave of his hand. Gdolkin said nothing, however, and Caduceus noted that his breathing was laboured.

'What is it, Iron-Father?'

'Araken... the warpstorm... the Ironclad...' The words spilled from him, a confused melange with no sense of order.

'Gdolkin!' Caduceus suddenly snapped. 'What *is* it?'

The Iron-Father took another deep breath, as though to compose himself, and then the dreadful truth poured from him. It was as if the Apothecary's question had been the trigger to release the pent-up anguish he was feeling, in a flood of uncharacteristic emotion, but which soon turned to more recognisable rage.

'It occurred during the Despoiler's fourth Black Crusade. Crucible was vulnerable, the Titan army was on the verge of readiness but the Araken system had become cut off. The Chaos fleets were driving back the Imperial forces and it was only a matter of time before the Achilles subsector was subsumed by the Arch-Fiend's forces. It seemed that all would be lost and that the Eye of Terror would expand to consume this region of space. The Mechanicus enclave on this world had to do something otherwise the Despoiler's forces would seize the Titans and consecrate them to their own fell purposes, putting them to their own evil use. The creation of Warpstorm Araken was a terrible accident. The technomagi had been trying to devise some cunning way to hide Crucible from Abaddon's forces.'

Caduceus looked at the Iron-Father in amazement. 'But what of the primarch? What of Ferrus Manus?'

Gdolkin's chin dropped onto his chest.

'The primarch is not here.'

'But this place, it is called the Tomb of the Ironclad,' Brother Ibrus said, joining the Apothecary at their commander's side.

'After the Legion.' Gdolkin sighed. 'These war machines form the Titanicus Metallum Armaturum - the Ironclad Legion. Ferrus Manus is not here.'

None of the Space Marines spoke. They had come to Crucible borne up by the new hope that they were on the verge of a fantastic galaxy-changing discovery. Gdolkin had tolerated the crazed priest so that the Iron Hands might achieve their own ends. But now he was reminded of the warning words of the Codex Astartes - Tolerance was a sign of weakness.

'Chaos curse me!' the Iron-Father suddenly roared, smashing the fist of his right hand down on the console in front of him in an exploding fit of rage. The console panel crumpled inwards throwing a spray of sparks from its internal circuitry. 'The warp take me for a fool!'

This time he brought both fists down together on the brass-finished instrument desk, shattering a pict-screen and oscilloscope in his fury.

'How could I have been such an addled idiot to believe that the primarch would be here on this warp-damned world?' Gdolkin raged. 'When it is not fit to even feel the tread of his boot on its blackened surface!'

Gdolkin had fervently held firm to his belief that the great Ferrus Manus would be found on Crucible and yet that very belief had proved to be his greatest weakness. And for one for whom weakness was to be despised in all its forms, wherever it might be found, the fact that he had succumbed so utterly to it fed the furious guilt consuming his mind. He was not fit to bear the title of Iron-Father. He was not fit to wear the insignia of the Iron Hands' Chapter. He was not fit to call himself a son of Medusa. He felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

A distant boom and clang rang through the stillness of the massive Titan hangar, even reaching the sphere of the teleportarium. The Iron-Father and Apothecary looked at one another.

'The enemy is in,' they both said in unison.

'They've breached the outer doors.' Gdolkin growled.

Here was the opportunity he needed to make amends for the failure of succumbing to weakness. The cause of his failing had been his over-arching pride. He had been driven to find the primarch by the vision of him fighting at the Ferrus Manus's right-hand, when in fact his actions had helped lead the Chaos powers to the prize that the Adeptus Mechanicus had hidden all those thousands of years ago!

He would vent his furious frustrations in battle against the Chaos-lovers, Gdolkin thought, bitterly eaten up inside. He would wash his soul clean of guilt in the blood of the Emperor's enemies.

A distant sound like the susurrant of an ocean breaking on the jagged rocks of the stubborn shoreline reached the Space Marines' ears and augmented auditory receptors. It was the sound of far-off shouts and screams, of pounding, running feet, of chanting voices raised in unholy supplication, of worse things loosed from the Sea of Souls by blasphemous blood-rites.

'They're on their way.' Caduceus said, his senses heightened by anxiety.

'Then we must make our stand here.' Gdolkin stated with finality, 'in the Tomb of the Ironclad - that has buried all our hopes for our Chapter. Only in battle can we right the wrongs of our misplaced pride.'

The Apothecary wondered if the Iron-Father was really talking about himself alone at this point.

'We must join our brothers at the threshold to the Titan hangar. We have to buy Magos Thule all the time that he needs to complete the true quest.'

'THE HOST HAS breached the outer doors, magos,' the adept seated in the tactical officer's position on the bridge of the *Deus Mortem* called over the humming of the god-engine's powering systems.

'And we will be ready for them.' Omega Thule said, an ophidian smile forming on his adapted face.

This was the moment he had known would come, ever since the *Corrupter of Colchis* had made its appearance in orbit over Crucible. It was the moment he had been waiting for and, if he admitted it, the moment he had been looking forward to. This was to be the culmination of a quest that had consumed him and directed his life for the last three hundred years.

'And what of our reluctant allies?' Thule asked.

'The Iron Hands are moving to engage the enemy,' the tactical tech-adept replied.

'Then the pieces are all in place, at last. Let the endgame begin.'

THE IRON HANDS, all twenty-one of the remaining brothers together again, stood at the threshold to the vast Titan hangar. They had been unable to secure the massive doors. Whatever Thule had done to open them had burnt out the opening mechanisms and their internal workings were now seized solid so that the Space Marines couldn't even heave the doors closed themselves.

The Iron Hands heard the enemy before they saw them, their sickening chanting becoming clearer and louder amidst the roars and bestial hoots of the warp knew what monstrosities the Word Bearers had pressed into their service, interspersed with the staccato rattle and thumping boom of weapons discharging.

Then the vanguard of the horde hove into view amidst the smothering darkness of the cavernous hallway. Their number defied counting. They moved as quickly and as unstoppably as a tsunami, their own torch-beams and the flickering light of burning brands illuminating their way through the buried Mechanicus complex.

The Chaos host swept along the processional corridor. All the horrors of the warp were here.

Blasphemous renegade Marines, warp-spawned monstrosities - all tentacles, snapping beaks, mewling mouths and slicing claws - that bore no resemblance to the mortal creatures Chaos had moulded them from,

and smoking, shadowy primal emotions made horrid flesh. There were other things too, huge hulking creatures that seemed to not know what they were, an amalgam of armoured warrior, crawling, inconstant flesh and brutal high-calibre weaponry.

And in the vanguard of the attacking force there were those damned individuals who had sold their souls to Chaos, malformed mutants, hollow-eyed traitors, half-naked cultists with cut flesh - the very lowest of the low.

How dare the servants of the Outer Dark desecrate this holy shrine of the most highly venerated Machine God? Iron-Father Gdolkkin fumed. He fixed the nearest of the horde with his targeting eye and levelled his bolt pistol.

'For the Gods of Chaos!' the Word Bearers were chanting. 'From the fires of betrayal, unto the blood of revenge, we bring the word of Lorgar, the Bearer of the Word, the Favoured Son of Chaos. All praise be given unto him!'

The sour words of their blasphemous creed made the Space Marines want to scream in agony. Instead they responded with a holy battle-cant of their own.

'For Ferrus, the Emperor and the Ommissiah!' the Iron Hands bellowed at the tops of their voices, their battle-cries amplified through the vox-casters built into their helms.

'In the name of Ferrus Manus the Breaker of Darkness, in the name of the Ommissiah and for the glory of the Emperor of Mankind!' Gdolkkin roared.

And battle was joined.

THIRTEEN

SACRAMENT

THE BATTLE FOR THE IRONCLADS

IRON-FATHER GDOLKIN'S bolt pistol kicked in his hand, the mechanics of the bionic gauntlet absorbing the recoil of the firing gun. In front of him the blubbery ape-features of a grotesque hulking creature exploded in a mess of blood, bone and fat.

Logic told him that the mutant could once have been human, but either due to the cruel manipulation of the warp, twisted blessings of the uncaring gods of Chaos, or generations of exposure to toxic, industrial pollution in its family's bloodline, the mutant's physical human form had devolved practically beyond recognition.

Whatever its genetic heritage, or the cause of its deformity, the huge brute slumped to the blood-slicked ferrocrete floor of the vaulted hangar utterly dead, its brains blasted from its lumpy skull.

Another crazed mutant, its ill-proportioned body as large as the Space Marine's, flung itself out of the ravening pack of the Chaos vanguard, forcing its way between the columns of the gaping portal. Its barrel torso was alive with writhing purple scar tissue. Great swathes of pallid flesh had been tattooed with bizarre hook-curved patterns. Gdolkín did not know what they meant but the Chaplain in him assured him that it was nothing good. The tattoos were just another sign of the degradation the mutant had allowed itself to succumb to through its veneration of the Dark Gods.

The hulking mutant reached for the Iron-Father with two thick, rubbery tentacles that sprouted from the bulging hump of its right shoulder. The pseudo-pod limbs were boneless, made up of almost nothing but tough muscle. The tentacles wrapped themselves lithely around the Iron-Father's bolter arm and tugged.

Gdolkín was momentarily surprised by the brute's strength. From warnings flashing up in the display of his helmet visor he registered that

the bionics of his lower left arm were feeling the strain. The hefty servomotor built into his left shoulder, combined with those of his armoured suit, ground and protested as Gdolkin resisted the muscular mutant's own straining pull.

But the unnatural strength of a Chaos-corrupted mutant was no match for the bionically enhanced body of an Iron Hands' Space Marine. Steadily, servos whining painfully inside his power armour, Gdolkin drew the mutant towards him. Realising that it was losing this battle, the ugly brute swung at the Iron-Father with the cleaver it held in its over-developed left arm.

The monster seemed ill-equipped to be leading a charge against the fully armoured might of a Space Marine Chapter, wielding what was no more than a heavy-headed cleaver in the face of bolters and force field-sheathed power weapons, but Gdolkin did not underestimate the threat it posed.

The Iron-Father was too quick for the hulking brute. He brought his own power axe to bear, meeting the mutant's cleaver and, with a twist of his wrist, caught the haft of the weapon behind the blade of his own axe, yanking it free of the meaty paw that held it.

Before the deformed abhuman beast knew what was happening Gdolkin powered the axe across his body and brought the crackling blade down on the hump of the mutant's swollen shoulder, slicing through the rubbery flesh there and severing the roots of the tentacles. Gdolkin immediately felt the cords of muscle wrapped around his forearm go limp.

An expression that was a grotesque mixture of astonishment, pain and bewilderment twisted the features of the Iron-Father's attacker, a mouth full of jutting tusks hanging open in dumb surprise.

Gdolkin's third sweep of his axe took the mutant's blubbery head from its thick neck.

But still the mutants came at the resilient Iron Hands.

The Iron-Father waded into a press of traitor Guardsmen, like an avatar of the Light-Bringer, Ferrus Manus reborn, laying about him with his crackling power axe as he sprayed bolter shells into the pack from the blazing muzzle of his kicking pistol. The force field generated by his Mechanicus Protectiva fizzed and sputtered as the las-bolts struck it, deflecting them in brilliant bursts of light.

Gdolkin was aware of the whickering fire of las-weapons coming intermittently from behind him. The tech-guard were arrayed behind the shield formed by the Iron Hands' armoured bodies, adding the pulsing fire of their lasguns to the assault on the heretic horde, as was Thule's servitor-driven Chimera. The magos might no longer be present but the Chimera had followed the tech troops to join in the defence of the hangar.

Either side of the magos's command hatch the servitors hard-wired into the heavy bolter emplacements were spraying the mutant masses with explosive mass-reactive shells, while at the rear of the vehicle the lascannon-linked drone was doing the same. For the time being the fourth slave-machine was unable to bring its multi-melta to bear, lest it harm the Imperial defenders with its friendly fire.

But many among the mutants were also firing back at the Space Marines and tech-guard. As far as the Iron Hands were concerned, the mutants' primitive solid-shot weapons and looted laspistols did not have the power to really cause them concern, the ceramite plates of their power armour absorbing the worst. The less well-protected tech-guard were more reliant on the screen of the Space Marines to provide them with enhanced protection but, as became apparent, some of the soldiers, squad leaders mainly, possessed their own personal force fields.

The Chimera-servitors were not so fortunate. A lucky shot from an autogun struck the left bolter-drone and blew a chunk out of its right shoulder assembly, gyrating the servitor round on its swivel-mount and spinning the gun off target too. The bolter continued to spew out rounds for a few vital seconds, before the servitor's injury-reactions subroutines kicked in, and narrowly avoided hitting the Marines of Tactical Squad Erastus.

The mutants were not all as large as those Gdolkin had dispatched. By far the greater majority were no better than the degenerate warped underclass found scraping a living in the catacomb foundations of hive-cities. They had either been enslaved into serving the Word Bearers or had just as likely readily joined the Legions of Chaos when the renegades had claimed their homeworlds as their own in their pillaging raids carried out from within the Eye of Terror.

These once-human dregs sported myriad different and disturbing mutations. Some had multi-jointed limbs that looked like they should have belonged to arachnids or sea-dwelling crustaceans. Others had cloven

hooves in place of feet or moved by shuffling over the ground on disgusting slug-like appendages. Horns and jaw-disfiguring tusks were common, as were vertebrae spines and uncontrolled matted hair growth. Some had reptilian scales or veined fins extruded from their arms, backs and heads. Strange mottled markings covered the glistening skin of others.

The armour they wore was as varied as their physical appearance. Many had clearly scavenged pieces of armour from their dead enemies, and not only from battles against Imperial troops either. One or two appeared to have had rough-and-ready suits made to fit uniquely twisted body shapes. Some needed no armour at all, their own epidermal mutations providing them with all the protection they required, from hardened shell-carapaces to iron-hard archeosaur scales. They were armed with everything from nock-edged bayonets and rusted swords, through crude firearms and looted Guard-issue lasguns, to savage shearing claws and crushing pincers.

The most bizarrely deformed even had more than one head, secondary mouths gaping in their bodies where mouths had no right to be, or too many eyes scattered across waxy, misshapen features.

Bellowing the words of the Litany of Purification, Gdolkon brought down a mutant with a hideous, skull-like face and then another that had no head at all, its face in the middle of its exposed midriff.

Something that had black ophidian body parts and fanged serpent heads emerging from holes in its rusty armour turned the barrel of an archaic ripper gun on the Iron-Father. His power axe cut through the iron tube of the firearm, its rough wooden stock and its magazine of scatter-shot shells. As the weapon fell apart in the mutant's hands, Gdolkon rammed the muzzle of his blessed pistol into the visor slit of his opponent's plate metal helmet and blew out its brains, the bolter shells ricocheting inside the can of the helmet.

Out of the corner of his eye Gdolkon saw Brother Fundare of Tactical Squad Erastus set fire to a fish-eyed thing that breathed through gasping gills on its neck, while Brother Accin thrust his whirling chainsword into the stomach of a hairless man who seemed untouched by mutation, other than for the fleshy ring of a leech mouth, crammed with tiny needle-point teeth.

The Iron-Father kicked out at a mutant with a lashing rat's tail and a segmented tapeworm quality to one arm, the other an almost skeletal taloned three-fingered hand. As the degenerate creature stumbled

backwards on the three stumps of its crooked legs, he gutted it with an arcing swing of his power axe clutched firmly in the Gauntlet of Menestus.

Truly these were the lost and the damned. These abominations did not deserve pity. They could expect nothing more than the Emperor's ruthless justice delivered by his fanatical Iron Hands.

And then Gdolkon saw that there were other horrendous blasphemies against nature, crawling, slithering and dragging their way through the Chaos pack towards his warriors' defensive line. There was an impression of stretched and melted flesh and bone, reformed into new, impossible, and utterly deadly forms. These creatures - if something so perversely unnatural even warranted such a description - were all distended flesh, ropes of muscle and bony protuberances, covered in patches of thick, bristly fur, drooling obscenely from a plethora of screaming, snarling mouth-parts.

One of the stomach-turning perversions was being goaded towards the tomb's defenders by the Word Bearers and a dozen, half-naked, bleeding cultists. Their black robes made them appear not unlike the Shinarii the Iron Hands had encountered on Herod.

The monstrous beast did not appear to have one particular discernable form. It was an amalgam of claws, tentacles, mewling mouths, sucker-probosces and somewhere within it all was a mollusc-eyed face and clicking beak. As Gdolkon locked the dark-spawned creature within the targeting triangles of his artificial eye, the amorphous mass of its body continued to change shape. Knobs of bone moved under the tense canvas of its skin whilst muscles spasmed as if some parasitic entity was moving around beneath it.

The Word Bearers seemed determined to wear the Iron Hands down, throwing everything they could at them, before they engaged them. It was just the kind of base behaviour Gdolkon expected from those sacrilegious blasphemers who had sworn to follow the Despoiler.

Then the spawn-monster became a thing of scything metre-long claws, unfurling from audibly distorting limbs. It lunged for the Iron Hands' line. As it did so, the skin between its shoulder blades ruptured, a circular, triple-jawed mouth thrusting through the torn flesh, giving an agonised scream at the moment of its hellish birth.

Brother Naltech suddenly found the monstrous spawn on top of him. The creature moved with startling speed for something so big and

ungainly. It certainly took Naltech by surprise as the full weight of the monster fell on him. The Iron Hand still managed to bring his boltgun to bear, however. As he depressed his finger on the trigger, the smothering mass of the beast slowly crushing him, the creature's telescopic mouthparts lunged forward, the triple jaws closing around the gun. Naltech fired.

The spawn's mouth exploded in a splattering spray of viscous crimson blood and chunks of ossified material. But the shape-changing creature did not die. Although it no longer appeared to have any mouth to scream with, the beast still managed to make a hideous screeching noise that cut through Gdolkon like a chainblade. As he watched, more clawed limbs thrust from the sides of its huge frame in a welter of blood and trailing strings of gelatinous purple matter.

The claws rose as other Iron Hands turned their fire on the abomination and before they could stop it, the scything claws dropped, slicing through Naltech's armour and body, dividing him into three irregular pieces. Ropes of glistening grey viscera flopped from his opened armour. The Iron Hand's bolter fell uselessly to the ground. There was no doubting that he was dead.

Brothers Fundare and Samson stepped forward, filling the gap in the Iron Hands' ranks left by Naltech. Without saying a word, the two troopers hosed the Chaos spawn with flamer fire and energised plasma blasts. The beast was wreathed in searing flames, its very flesh bubbling and catching fire as it was consumed by the growing conflagration, thick greasy smoke gouting from its burning carcass. So the spawn-beast died, cooking in its own foul fluids.

Hearing a pitiful wail, Gdolkon turned to see the leader of one of the squads of tech-guard drop to his knees in the face of the pure horror of the warp-spawned Chaos beasts. The man's mouth was agape and his eyes wide pools of unadulterated terror. Although, as far as the Iron-Father could tell, the man had not suffered any serious physical injury, the mere presence of such blasphemies birthed from the warp had broken his mind.

Gdolkon had seen such a reaction before. Under the circumstances, in the midst of battle, there was only one thing he could do for the wretch. Raising his bolt pistol he fired off one round. The man's head burst like a ripe fruit. He was beyond help; nothing more could be done for him. The man was a liability in such a desperate situation.

Gdolkín realised that another Guardsman was frozen in horror, only this time it was not from witnessing the monstrous power of the claw-beast but because of the Iron-Father's callous actions.

Gdolkín stepped forwards but the man was gone, swallowed up by the ravening mutant throng and the Iron-Father found himself fighting for his life once more, as a pickaxe-wielding abhuman, its feathered head surmounting an elongated cobra's neck, flung itself at him.

The towering pillars of the portal were lit by the flaring, strobing light of bolter muzzle-flash and whooshing plasma discharge. There was the doppler scream of a missile soaring over the Iron-Father's head and into the pack of Chaos troops gathered at the threshold to the hangar.

Behind the mutant pack and insane traitor-slave conscripts, the Word Bearers were readying a second Chaos-beast. Gdolkín thought that he could see distorted, screaming human faces writhing within the carapace of its morphing body as the Chaos spawn scuttled forwards on dozens of pincer-legs, whilst a grotesquely long, suckered tongue whipped forwards from out of its shark-toothed maw.

The damned vanguard might only be made up mutants and traitors - the Iron Hands had yet to engage their Word Bearer overlords - but the sheer weight of their numbers was in danger of pushing the Iron Hands' front line back prematurely. And the Space Marines had all seen what the first of the Chaos-spawned abominations had done to Brother Naltech.

'Sergeant Braxus.' Gdolkín voxed to the commander of the Iron Hands' Devastator troops. 'Bring your men forward.'

Up until this point the Iron Hands' heavy hitters had been unable to play a full part in the battle. There was no high ground here that could be easily occupied, from which they could shoot at the enemy over the heads of their brother Marines and the tech-guard units, and so many of them were unable to capture the enemy within their sights. They had also been unable to engage the foe in hand-to-hand combat, the press of the magos's tech-guard troops being between them and the Word Bearers.

The Iron Hands having already dealt with the Word Bearers' airborne attack contingent on the basalt plain before the Crucible complex, Gol Braxus had been reduced to taking pot shots at the distant enemy with his missile launcher.

Their frustration had been building since the battle for the Titan hangar began. Now that they had a chance to vent those frustrations on the enemy,

the Devastators pushed forwards through the tech-guard, batting the crimson-suited soldiers aside, ploughing a channel through their formation, knocking many to the ground.

Then they were in the front line of the Iron Hands' defence, with slavering mutant brutes and mad-eyed traitors to the Emperor's cause - still wearing their Imperial Guard uniforms, only now they were defaced with heretic sigils and eye-watering runes - piling towards them.

'Squad Braxus!' the Devastator sergeant shouted over the hoots and ululating cries of the horde. 'On my mark, let them have it!'

Gol Braxus depressed the activation stud on his launcher and the missile in the tube blasted from the chamber, trailing jet-propellant smoke as it pierced the Chaos pack.

'Fire!'

The missile found its mark, its spear-like tip piercing the grotesquely rippling flesh of the second Chaos spawn before detonating. The warp-horror found itself at the centre of an expanding ball of bone shards, pulped gristle and coiling, purple viscera, all swallowed up by the hungry fireball of the explosion. Gobbets of still writhing, charred flesh rained down on the loyalists' line.

Iron-Father Gdolkin tried to ignore the cries of revulsion coming from the tech-guard. It was not the pathetic sounds that disturbed him, but the weakness of character he considered them to reflect. Men shook and gibbered in fear, some of them no longer even able to use their weapons when they needed them now more than ever.

And these men were supposed to be the elite foot soldiers of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Gdolkin despaired for what the rest of their armies must be like. No wonder the technomagi found it necessary to call upon the aid of venerable Astartes Chapters.

Where the Imperial defenders were weak, even though they should be strong in the face of such opposition, secure in their faith in Him Enthroned on Earth, the counter-case was true of those whose very physical appearance defined the ultimate weakness of the soul.

Normally Gdolkin would have expected the destruction of such a major target as the Chaos spawn to hit the morale of such weak-willed beings as turncoat traitors and malformed mutants so that they fell back or fled in the face of the Space Marines' far superior strength and resolve. And

although some of the traitors broke off their heretic chants or looked askance, they hardly faltered in their advance on the Iron Hands.

This gave Gdolkin reason to think for a second. The only thing that could keep such weak-willed creatures fighting in the face of such terrible, vengeful power was their own faith in the uncaring, wilful gods of the Outer Dark.

The Word Bearers were a formidable force indeed, Gdolkin considered, for they not only had strength and terror amongst their arsenal, they also had faith, albeit a corrupted creed that damned all who followed it, but faith nonetheless.

Faith could move mountains, the Chaplain in Gdolkin thought, rouse entire planetary populations to fight or send a thousand ships to face the perils of the immaterium all in the pursuit of one seemingly insignificant goal, whether it be faith in the Emperor or a misguided heretical belief in the fell powers of the warp. Faith was the most powerful weapon in the galaxy, that and its counterpart, despair.

Gdolkin was reminded of a passage he had once caught sight of in a supposedly restricted Ordo Hereticus text: 'There is no place for the weak-willed or hesitant, only by firm action and resolute faith will mankind survive. No sacrifice is too great, no treachery too small.'

This sentiment summed up how he was feeling. It was as if the ultimate prize had been snatched from his very hands and now, utterly disheartened, with nothing else to lose, Gdolkin was prepared to sell himself dear to do all he could to stop those who would add insult to injury by turning the mighty progeny of the Omnissiah to their own foul purpose. But ultimately the Word Bearers' heretic horde was still a force that could be beaten for that very reason, because of their flawed faith. The Word Bearers, and their indoctrinated slave-soldiers, placed their faith in terrible, ancient entities that were the unimaginably vast, complex and powerful manifestations of the most primal and animalistic of emotions, and as such they knew neither compassion nor reason.

The Gods of Chaos were uncaring beings; their eternal scheming governed more by the fickle whims of capricious fate than by reasoned logic, such was the nature of ever-changing emotional responses.

It was why Abaddon's blasphemous crusade would also ultimately fail. Iron-Father Gdolkin would do all he could to thwart the Despoiler's usurping plans. The battle here, defending the Tomb of the Ironclad from

the invading Chaos host, was a microcosmic reflection of the greater game being played out by the forces millions-strong.

And indeed, the fate of the Imperium could be decided here, so evenly matched were the two opposing forces in the greater scheme of things. The addition of a Titan Legion eighty-one god-engines strong really could make all the difference to the resolution of the Despoiler's Thirteenth Black Crusade, for good or ill. The galaxy-spanning realm of the Emperor's Imperium would stand or fall depending on the outcome of this battle. Death or glory, salvation or damnation. It would all come down to this and the Iron-Father was determined that the Imperium would not fall because the Sons of Ferrus Manus had been found wanting.

Screaming with all the anger and frustration boiling inside him, Gdolkon threw himself at the Chaos host, bolt pistol roaring its own litany of death, his crackling power axe held high above his head.

'SQUAD DAGAN!' THE team's veteran sergeant shouted. 'Onward and upward!'

His last words were lost to the roar of his jet pack firing but the sentiment and the inspiring example of their leader blasting upwards was enough.

The six-strong assault squad had come through a great deal in recent weeks. It was they who had led the attack on the Citadel of Antipax from the air, and survived the brainstorming attack of the cult's rogue psyker. They had survived but they had been cowed by the experience: they had shown weakness in their encounter with the psyker-witch. Dagan had been determined that his squad would prove themselves worthy to be called Iron Hands again, to be considered honourable, mettled Sons of Medusa, and had ordered his men back to battle, alongside the rest of the Iron-Father's relief force, in the assault on the Bei'bul caves.

They had given a good account of themselves in that battle, until the Word Bearers' heretic-Chaplain had initiated the destruction of Herod's Araken Artefact, the airborne assault Marines being hurled against the walls of the desecrated cavern. It had not been the conclusion that any of the Iron Hands had sought.

But things had improved when matters had seemed at their most desperate. When the Iron Hands had barely escaped death as the faithful *Iron Eagle* crashed on Crucible and fleeing from the pursuing Chaos host,

Squad Dagan had halted the Raptors' assault on the Iron Hands' Adeptus Mechanicus party. In close aerial combat Squad Dagan, soaring on wings of steel and flame, had shown the inhuman Raptors that giving in to the cruel whims of Chaos could not compete with the fanatical devotion and discipline of the redoubtable Iron Hands. The entire flock had been brought down and yet not one of the assault Marines had been lost in that battle.

The assault squad rocketed upwards, describing a sharp apexed parabola, getting above the confused throng at the gates to the Titan hangar. The veteran sergeant saw tech-guard grappling with traitor Guardsmen. Hulking Chaos Marines in desecrated suits of Terminator armour turned huge weapons, hurling scything fire on the Iron Hands. Dagan was sure that he saw one of Sergeant Braxus's Devastators stumble and disappear in the crash.

And he could see other things, unspeakable things, moving forwards through the Chaos host, the orange light of guttering torches illuminating gnarled horns, pock-marked gangrenous flesh, glistening loops of exposed intestines, matted black fur, burnished talismans, the ruddy gleam of dagger-length incisors and massive monstrosities that were part machine, part daemon and all warped embodiment of Chaos.

Bolt pistols rattling and Dagan's plasma pistol screaming, the Assault Marines commenced their descent, swooping down gracefully towards the Chaos warriors, dispensing the Emperor's vengeful justice from on high.

Somewhere within the gore-stained mass of the Chaos crusaders was the inspiration behind this Word Bearers' host, its focus and ultimate inspiration, the individual who had denied Squad Dagan its moment of glory in the caves of Bei'bul - the Word Bearers' Dark Apostle. If they could find him now, they could seize the initiative and cast him down in the face of the Emperor's wrath and the implacable hatred of the Omnissiah. They would be as the mighty heroes of legends described in the Scriptorium of Iron. Their deeds would be spoken of in the legends of the Vurgaan clan and recorded in the annals of the Iron Hands' Chapter.

It was then that Dagan caught sight of the gaping black hole of a dragon-mouthed missile launcher and its Havoc Marine operator.

The Iron Hands might have two to three thousand years of battle experience in total between them but some of the Word Bearers' host had like as not fought against the beleaguered warriors of the Imperium at a

time when the Emperor's favoured son had turned from His Glorious Light and Lorgar the Blasphemer had turned to worshipping darker, more vainglorious gods. Between them they had millennia of experience fighting the champions of the Imperium.

To every Chaos Havoc his heavy weapon - be it lascannon, autocannon or daemon-possessed flamer - was a trusted ally of a thousand battles, an extension of his own corrupted form. The Havoc bearing the missile launcher did not miss his target. Without having time to utter a sound, Brother Sered died in a crimson ball of greasy flame and hellish black smoke, blown apart by the daemon-blessed rocket.

Brother Gamen had time to scream as a searing beam of lascannon-fire torched his jump pack. He was sent spiralling away by the damaged pack to crash into one of the great columns supporting the portal's great lintel. His crumpled, dented body dropped into the seething throng of cultists below, where it was torn apart in a frenzy of cruel carnage.

Dagan was shocked out of his reverie into vehement action. He trained his plasma pistol on the visor-eyed Havoc.

From somewhere else amidst the Chaos horde another weapon fired. There were just too many corners to cover within the mayhem consuming the entrance to the tomb. Dagan dropped like a stone.

He knew he was dying. Flame licked around him; he could see it roiling across the faceplate of his helmet through his sooty visor. Plasma pistol firing again, his whirling chainsword thrust forwards in his other hand, the veteran sergeant did his best to aim himself at the point where he felt he would be able to make his death count for as big a blow against the enemy as it would be to the Iron Hands.

'For Ferrus Manus and the Iron Hands!' he screamed as the collapsing reactor core of his power armour melted through his spine and the internal bionic repairs of previously survived disasters.

The gaggle of plague-ridden things loomed large before him. His sacrifice would count for something after all.

SERGEANT GOL BRAXUS felt the Shockwave of Veteran-Sergeant Dagan's death-dive ripple through the ground quaking beneath his feet. Roiling black smoke rose from the jagged-edged crater that had newly appeared in the ferrocrete threshold of the vast chamber. The pall obscured the light of firebrands and torch-beams. Cultists and traitor Guardsmen ran

screaming from the devastation through the smoke and roar of bolter fire, falling before the Iron Hands' withering hail of bolter shells.

Dagan's death had dealt the Chaos host a grievous blow indeed, but would it be enough to stem the tide of their invasion altogether? He thought not.

Sergeant Braxus and his Devastators were also having a satisfyingly destructive impact on the enemy host, in spite of Brother Alculus being knocked back by reaper autocannon fire from a Chaos Terminator. Alculus had risen, the chestplate of his power armour pock-marked with shell craters, hefting his chugging heavy bolter in both gauntleted hands.

The squad's hulking leader now turned the smoking tube of his missile launcher in the direction of the Havoc squad of Chaos Space Marines who had dealt Assault Squad Dagan such a dolorous blow.

A darkly red-armoured warrior, wearing the kind of suit favoured by paladin-warriors on Imperial worlds that had regressed to a feudal state, came into view between the crosshairs of the Devastator's visor-slaved sight. His pre-Heresy-pattern armour had been debased and defiled with grotesque, daemon-face adornments and profane inscribed verses. A shrunken human head, with long, lank black hair had been skewered to a spike protruding from the dome of the Word Bearer's helmet, making it look as if he had a tribal topknot. Resting on the Havoc's shoulder was a dragon-mouthed lascannon of archaic, warp-inspired design.

Braxus depressed the activation stud on the side of his heavy weapon. The missile rocketed out of the end of the launcher with a roaring *whoosh*, but Braxus remained unmoved by the recoil of the armament, the sheer weight of his Terminator battle-suit helping him maintain his braced position. The Devastator sergeant watched the missile close on its target through the crosshairs of his aiming-sight. The krak missile hit the Havoc full in the face, detonating on impact. The Chaos Marine's head was blown apart as was the cursed lascannon and much of the Havoc's torso.

As the next missile was loaded into the chamber, Braxus was aware of Brother Samson locking onto a target. Samson's plasma cannon coughed and a ball of energised matter that dissolved both armour and flesh enveloped an axe-wielding Word Bearer. Zuriel's lascannon fired, taking a flailing cultist's head and left arm off in a single, searing blast, whilst Caucor's heavy bolter-fire tore through a pack of ravaging mutants, the

bionic left-hand side of his body absorbing the recoil from the mighty weapon.

But no matter how many they were able to destroy, the devotees of the Word just seemed to keep coming. How many of their verminous filth had there been aboard their corrupted battleship? And how much longer would it be before Magos Thule and his Emperor Titan were ready, Braxus found himself wondering?

But in truth it made no difference to the defiant Iron Hands, and Braxus's steadfast Devastators in particular. They would keep fighting until they had conquered or until not one of their number remained standing.

'FOR FERRUS, MEDUSA and the clan!' Brother-Sergeant Erastus bellowed, ever the loyal son of the Vurgaan clan company, leading the charge against the Word Bearer Marines as the Chaos host began to push the Imperial defenders back from the threshold and break through into the hangar itself.

The Word Bearers were a macabre parody of what a gene-engineered warrior should be. Ten thousand years ago, their once noble armour had been plain and functional in its form, the only real ornamentation being the word of the Imperial creed that they bore to the reclaimed worlds they welcomed into the fledgling Imperium. But now their suits were daubed a garish red and covered in ostentatious decoration extolling the virtues of their blasphemous beliefs. Their post-Heresy armour boasted idolatrous imagery, hung with chains, and incorporated bonelike horns and the ensorcelled word of their dark patrons, passed down to them by the Dark Apostles of their Legion, inscribed in runic forms no mortal man should ever be forced to see.

Calling down prayer-curses on the heads of their enemies, the three remaining warriors of Squad Erastus charged the advancing line of crimson-armoured Traitor Marines. From somewhere in the serried ranks ahead of him, Sergeant Erastus and his men - for who could not notice such a thing - heard the rattling roar of a gatling gun and beams of strobing light made silhouettes of the Chaos warriors closing on them. Behind him there came an accompanying detonating boom as one of Sergeant Braxus's Devastators was dramatically slain.

There would be time to mourn the dead later, Erastus thought, and locked the serrated bayonet blade of a snarling Word Bearer within the jagged teeth of his chainsword.

THE IRON-FATHER looked around him, the words of the Litany of Righteous Deliverance spilling from his tongue. He disembowelled a dog-faced daemon with his axe, the coruscating force field sheathing its blade making it seem as though the axe-blade was ablaze.

He felt a rush of pride as he saw Librarian Melchor striding into battle, his psychic hood crackling with barely contained esoteric energies and his eyes alive with white fire. The facade of his personality might have been flayed from his mind by the ghost-storm that had assailed him, but his raw psyker-power remained.

A cultist's head melted in the face of a blast of unrestrained, wild psyker-magic. Melchor threw a hateful look at a looming Word Bearer and the Chaos Marine collapsed to his knees, holding gauntleted hands to his armoured head.

Gdolkon was surprised to hear the Librarian's strident voice again, after such a long time. 'Die, warp spawn, die!' Melchor roared, just as he had used to, the fire he had once had restored to him again.

There was a flutter of embroidered cloth and the Iron-Father's attention was drawn to Banner-bearer Kansbar. The Iron Hands' standard-bearer gripped the pole of the banner known through the Vurgaan clan as the Steel Standard. The flag bore the cog-toothed wheel of the Cult Mechanicus bisected by the lightning-strike symbol of the clan company and the motto "Ferrum Bellum". The banner-pole was topped with an Imperial aquila. The exquisite embroidery made it look as if the image upon it had been cast from metal in three dimensions. But now the metallic threads were soiled with oil, blood and other fluids that were too horrible to consider too deeply.

A bolt pistol kicked in the standard-bearer's silvered left hand, dropping crazed cultists and renegade Guardsmen with its thrice-blessed ammunition as the banner-bearer sang a battle-hymn to the Emperor. Brother Dothan Kansbar was truly an inspiration to the courageous Iron Hands.

Gdolkon felt an oppressive sense of overwhelming despair suddenly sink down upon him, crushing his resolve and sapping the strength from

his muscles and psychosomatically even from the fibre-bundles of his augmented body.

The Iron-Father caught himself: such thought was weakness, such emotion the manifestation of a critical flaw in his personality. And yet, although the beleaguered Imperial troops were woefully outnumbered and outgunned by the Chaos horde, and the long hoped for prize of the primarch had been stolen from Gdolkín, up until that point in the battle he had felt nothing but pride for his warriors, and steadfast determination to purge the Tomb of the Ironclad of the malignant infestation of evil. What had happened to change that, he wondered?

Of course the answer was nothing within *him* had brought on this change; it had to be from an external source. As soon as Gdolkín realised this, he felt the waves of palpable despair pressing down upon him even more strongly from without, but he was able to shake the doubts from his own mind and feel his reserves of strength returning to him.

Considering the palpable waves of malignant warp energy that tormented him, what daemonic manifestation was pushing its way through the Chaos host towards him now?

And then Gdolkín saw the first of them: a stomping behemoth of a Marine, moving with a slow inexorable force akin to the ever-shifting tectonic plates of the crust of his homeworld. And yet it wasn't a Chaos Marine. It might have been once, but now it was something less than the other Word Bearers challenging the Iron Hands and at the same time, paradoxically, something greater. Too long within the warping realm of the Eye of Terror had made it something akin to a daemon-possessed robot. And three of the colossal blasphemies were lumbering towards his position in the Iron Hands' line.

The Iron-Father had heard tell of such abominations in the legends that circulated the systems bordering the Eye of Terror. Many of the Marines of the Chaos Legions, who before the Heresy had lived as warrior-monks of the Emperor, had maintained their propensity for fanatical religious observance. But where they had once followed their own hybrid forms of the Imperial creed they now paid fealty to the warping powers of Chaos just as zealously. The Word Bearers were a prime example of this, but others among the traitors had taken to worshipping various aspects of the Fell Powers, forming particular cult offshoots, such as the blood-hungry Berzerkers of Khorne or the hellish Slaaneshi Noise Marines.

The three abominations Gdolkin faced now were members of the Obliterator cult and their allegiance lent them a terrifying, mind-twisting metamorphosing power. The Iron-Father watched in fascinated horror as the daemon-machines turned semi-organic autocannon-like growths on their foes, mowing down tech-guard and Iron Hands alike with their withering fire - both Brothers Ibrus and Taudis being blown apart by the devastating barrage - before laying into the Imperial troops with weirdly reshaping adamantium-clawed power fists.

And then one was standing directly in front of him, bearing down on him with bestial hatred burning in the black pits of its eyes, the first and most terrible of the Obliterators. A face that was all stretched skin and organically twisting metal tubes leered down at the Iron-Father, its mouth a taut slash amidst the deformity of its rusted features.

Something told Gdolkin that his bolt pistol would be of little effect against this adamantium hulk. Hefting his power axe in both hands, its field generator humming reassuringly, he prepared to face this most deadly of foes.

Turning the beady black points of its eyes on the Iron-Father, the split of the Obliterator's mouth widened, its jaws yawning open and dislocating like a serpent's. From the depths of its throat a gleaming gun barrel appeared.

Drawing on all his reserves of strength, Gdolkin threw himself aside as the flamer-barrel fired, dousing the spot where he had been standing with molten fire.

Gdolkin knew he didn't have any time to waste if the Iron Hands were to defeat the daemoniac Obliterators. As the Marine-beast reached for him with a vastly oversized hand - the massive digits of which were cycling cannon barrels, growling chainblades and brutal adamantium claws - Gdolkin made a heroic leap forwards and upwards, hurling himself onto the creature's broad back. As he did so, the Iron-Father brought his axe down, sinking the crackling blade into its armoured hide and hanging on to the haft of the trapped weapon as sparks and a viscous black ichor spurting from the cleft wound.

The Obliterator howled, a strange grating mechanical sound, like amplified voxponder feedback, and tried to shake the Iron-Father loose. But Gdolkin would not be shaken free. His own servo-arm swung wildly about, unable to get a purchase on the Obliterator. With his free left hand,

however, he managed to grab hold of a curving, metre-long spike that jutted from the brute's left shoulder plate.

Tubular fungal-pipe growths writhing from the hunch of the Obliterator's back puffed exhaust fumes into the Iron-Father's face. He felt something scrape against his left thigh and his Mechanicus Protectiva crackled as something else scraped against the golden eagle-wings adorning his chestplate.

Gdolkon pulled himself up using the embedded power axe, and his grip on the horny spike, and glanced down. Other metal spikes were thrusting through the pallid, scarred skin that covered the Obliterator's back-armor, trying to remove the Iron Hand.

The Iron-Father tugged on his power axe to free it. Now that he was on top of the Obliterator he had to do something to actually stop it. But to kill an abomination so massive and so imbued with daemoniac energy he would have to do something truly monumental.

He needed a Predator or a Land Raider right now, the Iron-Father thought, or a Demolisher cannon at point-blank range. But he didn't have that kind of firepower.

Then it came to him. It had worked before, in a manner of speaking, against the daemon-possessed defiler so why not now, against this hellish abomination?

Gdolkon brought his axe down powerfully again, this time sinking it a good half a metre into the Obliterator's shoulder. The machine-thing yowled. Holding on by the axe, Gdolkon let go of the spike and dispensed a handful of grenades from his suit's utility belt.

'For Ferrus and Medusa!' he bellowed and, activating each one, thrust the explosives charges into the gaping rent in the Obliterator's carapace. He felt the Chaotic flesh of the creature sucking at his bionic hand. The Iron-Father pulled his hand free of the sucking flesh that was at the core of the shape-changing monster and saw the indentations of teeth-marks in the metal of the augment.

The Obliterator's right hand closed around Gdolkon. It must have mutated another limb, lengthening and growing another joint in its right arm so that it could execute the otherwise impossible manoeuvre. A squealing chainblade cut into Gdolkon's armoured body, throwing a slew of warning icons across his visor-display.

Then he was flying through the air, crashing to ground ten metres away, flattening and killing a tech-guard beneath him as he landed, hearing the crunch of grinding gears in the augmetic of his left shoulder. More warning runes appeared. The Obliterator had dealt him a grievous injury but nothing like as devastating as the one that awaited the daemonic cyborg.

The grenades detonated.

For a second the Obliterator seemed to swell, stretched skin tearing, blood-wet flesh appearing between separating armoured plates; but only for a second.

The Obliterator vanished in the expanding angry fireball of a cataclysmic explosion. Gdolkin's olfactory' senses detected the stink of cooking daemon-flesh and burning machine-oil, as pieces of fused metal and mutating warp-flesh rained down amidst the Word Bearers' host and the Imperial troops.

Following such a momentous victory surely the Space Marines could have at least hoped to have turned the tide in their battle to defend the Titan hangar. But it was not to be.

The Iron Hands had suffered debilitating losses - only seven Space Marines remained standing - and almost all the tech-guard were dead. All eleven of the combat-servitors that had accompanied them into battle had been ripped apart by the savagery of the Chaos horde. Only Thule's servitor-tank remained at least semi-operational.

Yet the host still numbered in its hundreds. A mad mob of black-robed cultists, that could once have been servants of the Machine God, could now be seen following in the wake of the Word Bearers' force.

Iron-Father Gdolkin had no choice but to give the command to fall back. If they sacrificed themselves now they could play no further part in this epic battle, which was far from over. The *Dens Mortem* might still be captured before it could be brought to bear against the Chaos horde.

Gdolkin signalled Thule's tank-drone over the comm-net, broadcasting a data-stream containing override protocols that would bring the vehicle temporarily under his control.

At a word from the Iron-Father, Melchor, Caduceus, Standard-bearer Kansbar, Braxus, Zuriel and worthy Erastus broke free of the Word Bearers and boarded the Chimera-vehicle. The battle-brothers still laying down a devastating hail of weapons-fire at the host, the tank accelerated

away from the breached hangar threshold, its engines protesting at the strain of carrying the Space Marine survivors. There was nothing they could do to recover their fallen brethren, or their precious gene-seed.

The Chimera sped along the main aisle of the tomb, the Steel Standard flapping in the vehicle's slip stream, past the cloistered Titans, swerving to avoid explosive long range fire from the Word Bearers' advancing line as it raced towards the waking Imperator.

Speeding past the sleeping Warlords Gdolkin saw that some cultists had somehow already infiltrated the Tomb of the Ironclad, as the battle raged at its entrance, boarding the hibernating Titans, but there was nothing the Iron Hands could do.

Nothing but pray, thought Gdolkin. So pray he did.

WAVE AFTER WAVE of Chaos cultists swarmed over the giant war machines of the Adeptus Titanicus, like maggots infesting a corpse. As the host spread throughout the vast, sepulchral chamber, half-human, half-mechanical things that had once been tech-priests and their acolyte adepts boarded the Titans, Warhounds, Warlords and Reavers alike. Herding indentured slaves before them, they began the task of powering up the ancient machines.

But there was something else the Chaos horde had to do before the lost gods of Crucible could serve the Despoiler in battle against the Imperial worms; the god-engines had to be reconsecrated to the Fell Powers of the warp.

As the corrupted tech-priests chanted dark blessings over the ancient machinery, anointing them with a mixture of unguent-oil, putrid blood and daemon-ichor, the traitor Marines made their sacrament to the profane pantheon of the Daemon Gods of Chaos. The blood of the enslaved of the Word Bearers was shed in an orgy of human sacrifice and ritual murder, the precious, crimson fluid sluicing over armoured hulls, atomic weapons, millennia-old plasma engines and the arcane machineries of the long dead Mechanicus cult ancients.

Their task was made all the easier, the host soon realised, since the outpost world of Crucible had been subject to the dominion of the warp for many centuries. In all that time the holy warding sigils of the engineers and technomagi had slowly but surely been broken down, the insidious influence of the warp seeping into the sleeping mind-cores of the time-

frozen machines. Once there the cancerous malignancy of Chaos had steadily eaten away the very sanctified security protocols and hallowed subroutines of the god-engines that were supposed to keep Chaos out.

Throughout the Tomb of the Ironclad running lights ignited over the squadrons of the Metallum Armaturum as engines that had lain dormant for thousands of years roared into throaty life. The bellowing of the waking Titans echoed between the gantries and up to the distant vaulted roof of the gargantuan crypt. Once the newly Chaos-consecrated war machines were ready crewed by the corrupted tech-creatures and their indoctrinated enslaved workforce, the Word Bearers could begin the long process of transporting the Titans off-planet and onto the waiting *Corrupter of Colchis*. The Titans of the Ironclad Legion would then lead Abaddon's forces to victory against the Imperium in the Despoiler's conquest of Cadia and the galaxy beyond. A million million worlds and populations in their untold trillions would be converted to the true faith of Chaos, and the universe would belong to the Dark Gods at last.

IRON-FATHER GDOLKIN burst onto the command bridge of the Emperor Titan *Deus Mortem*, accompanied by the six remaining Iron Hands of his liberation force. They had lost many of their valiant brothers in the defence of the Titan hangar, including Reuban, Caucor, Samson, Fundare, and the entirety of Assault Squad Dagan. Gdolkin would make sure that their names were recorded for posterity in the Hall of Heroes within the land-behemoth *Weyland*.

Magos Omega Thule turned to take in the intruders. He was standing in front of the Titan princeps throne: a padded, cracked leather chair with a bundle of bio-interface cabling and a prominent connector spike protruding from the headrest. The snaking mechanical limbs of his mechadendrites waved menacingly behind his back. His needle-fingers were steepled beneath his gleaming chrome chin.

The air was thick with resinous incense smoke. From the expression on the tech-priest's lined features and the general atmosphere of unease, Gdolkin knew that things were not proceeding as the magos felt that they should.

'Thule, what's going on?' the Iron-Father demanded. 'I've been trying to contact you but there's something wrong with the comm.' Gdolkin received

nothing but painful interference in his auditory receptors when he had tried to vox the tech-priest. 'I'm not able to contact the *Ajax* either.'

'It must be down to some iniquitous machination of the corrupted ones,' Thule suggested. 'Now, before you resume your infernal questioning, you may have noticed that we are occupied in the Ommissiah's work here.'

Removing his helmet, Gdolk took a step towards the magos, fixing him with the targeting array of his red-lensed ocular implant.

'Thule, we have to destroy the Titans,' he said, his voice as hard as steel.

The tech-priest fixed the Iron Hand with an incredulous gaze of his own. The tech-adepts aboard the bridge continued to go about their business although possibly a little less confidently than before.

'We have to *what?*'

'Time is running out. The Ironclads are lost to us. But we can still stop the Chaos-lovers from claiming them as their own. We could initiate a chain reaction that would cleanse this whole Ommissiah-forsaken place by overloading the Emperor's generarium. The teleportarium will provide us with our means of escape.'

'But the Titan is a thing divine! You would destroy such marvels of the Ommissiah?' Thule exclaimed, his voice rising in pitch and inflections of hysteria shaping his words.

'We are running out of time. We do this now or we will have failed in our Emperor-given duty here.'

Thule was now himself stalking towards the Iron-Father, lashing mehadendrites reaching for him.

'You would murder deified god-engines of the Machine God? You would dare commit deicide?'

'By the Ommissiah, yes!' Gdolk snarled. 'Better that than let the enemy claim such devastating weapons to be turned against the Emperor's forces.'

'But we are on the verge of awakening the Titan's mind-core.'

'It matters not!' Gdolk rallied. 'The ultimate sacrifice has to be made. We cannot contact the *Ajax* to deal with this matter for us so we must act ourselves.'

'This is unthinkable! Unconscionable!' the tech-priest shrieked. 'I can't let you do this.'

'Then we shall do this without your help, priest!'

'You shall *not* do this, do you hear me? That is a direct order!'

'Your orders be damned, madman!'

Gdolkin turned to the last of his battle-scarred Iron hands, leaving Thule staring at the back of his head, the magos's metal mandible hanging open in appalled disbelief.

'We must go to the generarium chambers and set the reactor to overload,' the Iron-Father instructed. 'Make sure that no one can reverse your handiwork. If anyone tries to stop you, kill them.'

'Yes, Iron-Father!' the Space Marines each responded and left the bridge immediately. Time was slipping away. If they did not hurry, they would be too late.

Gdolkin turned back to the astounded tech-priest. 'Do not try to stop us.'

With that, the Iron-Father spun on his heel and made to exit the bridge.

The first energised matter blast sent a shocked Gdolkin stumbling forwards and overloaded his much abused Mechanicus Protectiva.

The Iron-Father turned round in bewildered surprise, distracted for a moment by fatigue and the crackling of the failing force-field generator. He looked at Magos Thule, astonishment etched across his face. The tech-priest had got hold of a plasma weapon from somewhere.

In the split second it took Gdolkin to realise this Thule fired the plasma gun again, this time expending its energy charge in one almighty blast.

The ball of plasma struck the Iron Hand in the middle of his chest, burning right through his body, and out through the exhaust fin of his suit's reactor pack, in a blaze of light.

Iron-Father Anatolus Gdolkin fell, his massive armoured body crashing to the deck of the command cabin with a resounding *clang*.

FOURTEEN

DARK APOSTLE

THE IMPERATOR TITAN DEUS MORTEM

MAGOS OMEGA THULE paced the length of the Titan's bridge, fingers drumming against one another in a rapid rippling rhythm, the metallic tapping of his feet playing a curious counter-point and his mechadendrites writhing. Things were no longer going according to plan. It was taking much longer than he had expected to bring the war machine to full operational capability and the enemy were practically on them.

The twenty or so adepts in Thule's retinue were working feverishly to power up the ancient god-engine, aided by the servitors they had brought with them. The magos's lackeys had barely dared react in any way to the Space Marine's death; there were greater things at stake here and, besides, they did not want to suffer the tech-priest's wrath either. The body of the Iron Hands' commander lay there still, face down on the grilled deck, wisps of acrid smoky vapour rising from the hole that had been burnt right through the middle of his chest, melting reinforced ceramite, bionic components and bio-engineered flesh.

Thule glanced at the corpse. The Space Marines might be the Emperor's elite but none were greater than the Mechanicus Masters of Mars, devoted servants of the Omnissiah and the true power behind the Golden Throne.

He paused in his pacing and turned his magnifying gaze out of an armaglass eye-port. Throughout the Tomb of the Ironclad the scurrying lapdogs of Chaos were infesting the Titans of the Legio Metallum Armaturum with their evil, waking the hibernating god-machines from their slumber of eons to join in union with the unholy followers of the Despoiler.

The renegades of the Word Bearers' Legion were renowned for their evangelical conversion of those they conquered to their blasphemous creed, bringing whole populations under their thrall. But this was mass

conversion on another scale entirely: reconsecrating an entire Titan Legion, of a size that was almost unheard of.

Thule could see running lights blinking into life in the darkness of the hangar, outlining the Titans, and realised for the first time how vast the chamber really was.

The Chaos creatures seemed to be having considerably greater success than him in activating the ancient war machines. And from the surveyor scans he could see registering on the green-tinged screens things appeared to be progressing far more swiftly for the host's corrupted tech-things. For a moment, Thule felt disgust knot his gut; that servants of the Omnissiah could sink to such a level of degradation and the corruption of their pure purpose.

Why was it taking his retinue so long to activate the *Deus Mortem*? Was it because it was an Emperor-class land battleship? Thule's area of expertise was in data-collection; he was not a Titan engineer. But in five hundred years he had picked up information about their design and operation here and there, so that in reality there was little he didn't know about the god-engines of the Titan Legions.

His adepts had intoned the correct prayers of activation and blessings to appease the soul of the goliath engine. Was it taking so long because his crew was so small? Certainly, to keep the Emperor running for any length of time would require a small army of servitors and tech-adepts, but once all the systems were on-line, with void shields up and the mind-core active, with the surviving tech-guard manning as many of the hull weapon emplacements as possible, the Emperor could be operated with only a skeleton crew.

Or was it something else?

Thule's augmetic eye speed-collated the data appearing on the flickering augur display screens and the Titan systems' monitoring dials. Generarium, weapon arms and tactical surveyors were all operating within normal parameters but until they could awaken the mind-core of the *Deus Mortem* the Emperor was useless to them.

'What is the delay?' Thule shouted. 'We have to get the mind-core on-line now!'

'We are having difficulty interfacing with the cogitator mind of the god-engine, magos,' an adept informed him with infuriatingly obvious logic.

'I can see that! But, Gods of Mars, what can we do about it?'

'The god-engine requires a human host, magos.'

Thule looked to the empty throne of the princeps position and the brass armature secured above it, trailing a knot of cables from the gleaming spike of the interface crown.

The tech-priest had considered the possibility that this might be a potential problem. None among the survivors of his entourage had been implanted with the correct cranial adaptation to be bonded to the Titan. His potential princeps-in-waiting, whom he had brought with him should the Ironclads prove to be - what indeed they were - a Titan Legion, had died in the shuttle crash.

The magos had hoped that, having intoned the correct prayers and blessings, and having anointed the Titan with the sacred unguents, that they would be able to awaken the Titan's mind-core without recourse to direct human interface. With the *Deus Mortem* conscious, at least in its own way, he would order the great god-engine- razer of cities, bane of Chaos, waster of worlds - into battle.

But there was another way. It was time to try something different. It would be dangerous, but Thule was desperate. If he was to awaken the Emperor fully and lead it into battle he had no choice.

Thule glided over to the ivory and mahogany-inlaid control console in front of the princeps throne. His augmented eye viewed the ornamented panel in a different light spectrum. X-ray scanners peeled away the external layers of the control panel, revealing the sacred patterns of the cogitator circuit boards beneath, and the paths his probes would have to follow to make communion with the intelligence of the machine.

Thule reached out a hand, chrome-finished digits extending unnaturally, his fingers moving in ways no natural musculature could ever allow. Before he touched the panel, his metal-spliced fingers still several centimetres away, tiny mechadendrites extended from the tips of his gleaming digits. The mechadendrites writhed like metallic, segmented worms, probing the dark metal plate of the access panel, the relief images of cybernetic skulls and circuit board pathway patterns. The mechadendrites' questing tips connected with tiny eye-sockets and mortis-grins, locking into place with a tattoo of staccato clicks.

The tech-priest braced himself, expecting the consciousness of the god-engine to hit him like a laser blast between the eyes. But there was nothing.

Thule closed his eyes, focusing his mind, straining to hear the *Deus Mortem* speak. Finally, he did hear something. At first he felt relief wash through him, but it quickly turned to despair as the daemonic whispering he could hear revealed the true horror of what had happened on Crucible.

The sibilant susurrating voices could be heard within the command cabin by the others on the bridge of the Titan, through the hiss of tannoy vox-casters. Many of the magos's more human adepts looked around up at the roof of the bridge in fear, hearing the insidious whispering voices whistling through the air around them, not quite able to clearly hear what was being said but knowing in their hearts that it was nothing good.

Magos Thule learnt at last what terrible toll millennia of exposure to Warpstorm Araken had wrought upon the *Deus Mortem*, and doubtless upon all the other Titans of the Legio Metallum Armaturum. Over long centuries the holy wards protecting the god-engines had been broken down, eaten away by the insidious evil of the warp. The voices he was hearing were the daemonic whisperings of the Titan's corrupted mind-core. The Ironclads were no longer avatars of the Machine God, Thule now realised, but vessels of the Chaos Gods, to do with as they saw fit.

And in that knowledge, the last vestiges of sanity left the deranged tech-priest.

THERE WERE SHOUTS of pain, screams of agony, cries of despair, half-formed prayers silenced, the rattle of bolter fire and the resounding clang of heavy armoured boots ringing from the walkway outside the entrance to the bridge. There was a cut-off scream and the hooded head of an adept bounced into the command cabin. It rolled to a stop at the feet of the frozen tech-priest, an expression of slack-jawed horror indelibly etched on its face.

A figure as tall as a Space Marine appeared framed within the arch of the bulkhead doorway and then strode onto the bridge, the all-pervading sense of evil that came with him making the colossus seem even larger and more threatening. The figure exuded such malevolence that the whimpering, shivering tech-adepts dared not even look upon the ghastly form of their deaths made flesh. Two of them were physically sick. Another suffered a fatal stroke.

The scything mace swung and struck again, decapitating another terror-stricken adept, blood jetting from the severed jugular of the body, as it fell,

spraying the glass dials of a console wall.

The warrior was clad in an ancient baroque suit of power armour the colour of dried blood, trimmed with sculpted bone. A pelt was draped across the giant's shoulders and clanking chains swung from his waist. Debased litanies had even been carved upon the warrior's gauntlets, greaves and every other piece of ceramite plate that made up his baroque garb.

But it was the Dark Apostle's helmetless head that instilled the most fear and dread in those on board the bridge. The skin was a deathly white; the hollows of its face darkly grey. Nubs of bone protruded from his skull beneath the pallid flesh to form two distinctive horns; a physical manifestation of the Word Bearer's corruption. But most obvious and soul chilling aspect of his appearance was the eight-pointed star that had been cut into his forehead.

The Dark Apostle fixed Omega Thule with a piercing stare. His eyes were pools of dark oblivion burning with all the fires of hell. His red-eyed gaze seemed to strip back the mortal flesh and lay the soul bare. But even under the Apostle's merciless, penetrating stare, the magos did not move. His awareness was lost in a world of insanity.

Behind the Word Bearer stood more of his debauched kind. The Apostle and the unholy warriors of his command group had fought their way on board the Emperor, meeting little resistance as the palpable waves of soul-despairing evil emanating from them caused all to quail and yield before them, those few who offered some semblance of resistance falling instead to their martial might and cruel-bladed weapons.

'You, behold the Iscariot!' the Dark Apostle declared his booming voice dripping with the syrup of corruption. His words alone seemed to have the power to turn the loyalist from the path of righteousness.

All those still alive on board the bridge were incapable of disobeying, despite the feelings of revulsion and nausea they were experiencing; even the tech-priest, although he was only partially aware of what he was happening.

'Behold, your saviour comes to free you from the fetters that shackle you to the corpse-lord rotting within his throne of death.' The Apostle held his blood-dripping mace high above his head, as he spoke, and the cowering tech-adepts saw for the first time that it was in fact the Chaos-Chaplain's desecrated crozius arcanum. 'I shall lead you from the path of

foolishness and false hope unto the way of the Word. I am the bearer of the word of truth, the word that liberates, the word of the rightful gods of the universe.'

The Iscariot strode forward, stepping over the body of the Iron-Father as if he hadn't even noticed it was there, approaching the magos, who returned the heretic-Chaplain's red-eyed gaze with an unblinking stare of his own. One of the adepts fainted whilst another voided his bowels in sheer mind-numbing terror.

'I am here to gather you all into the embrace of the true gods of mankind. With this army of god-engines at my command I will be able to fulfil my worthy crusade.' There was something about the Iscariot's words that persuaded any who heard them to believe what he said to be the truth indeed. 'But before the *Deus Mortem* can fulfil the role that the gods of the warp has planned for it, the machine must be consecrated to their great purpose.'

Without another word, the Apostle calmly swung his desecrated crozius at the skeletally thin magos. Thule's mechadendrites moved reflexively but it was not enough. His mind was gone and he did nothing to defend himself. The bloodied blade sliced through the tech-priest's midriff, shearing through cables and severing lubricant feeds in a spray of coruscating sparks and fountaining black oil. The two halves of Omega Thule tumbled to the floor of the cabin, hydraulic leg units jerking, steel tentacles coiling and uncoiling in silent agony. The metal floor of the cabin rang as the mechadendrites lashed against the grilling and the robotic legs continued to kick.

But the tech-priest had lived for over five centuries and would not die so easily. There was very little of him that hadn't been mechanically enhanced or doctored with rejuvenation processes at least once in the last five hundred years. In his life's quest to rediscover lost archeotech, and in his search for Crucible and the Tomb of the Ironclad, Thule had come across all manner of curious alien technology, and hadn't been averse to incorporating them into his own systems and mechanised creations.

Hands and arms twisted impossibly, moving in a way that was not possible for a normal human body, and pushed the magos's torso upright. Thule turned to look at his killer, a pitiful quizzical look etched on the human half of his face, his electronic eye whirring and clicking myopically. He opened his mouth to speak.

The crozius-mace dropped again, cutting a clean diagonal line across the tech-priest's face, from his ocular implant to the chrome-plated mandible of his jaw. The top of the Mechanicus priest's head slid off onto the floor in another spray of sparks. After over five hundred years of artificially extended life Magos Omega Tetronimus Thule was dead.

'In the name of the most beneficent Powers of the Warp, I rededicate this Titan to the service of Chaos, that it may aid us in our conversion of the weak-willed servants of the false corpse-emperor.'

'Who are you calling weak, heretic?'

Iron-Father Gdolkin rose like some black-armoured angel of death, crackling power axe in hand, like Ferrus Manus reborn.

The Iscariot turned to face his nemesis.

Gdolkin had been an Iron Hand for over two hundred years. He had been invested as a Chaplain-Techmarine of the Chapter fifty-five years ago. He had suffered countless injuries in his life of service as a warrior-monk of the immortal God-Emperor, and there had been times when, he was sorry to say, his flesh had failed him. When that happened it had been replaced with something better. As a result there was very little that was still flesh and blood of the Iron-Father any more.

Gdolkin glanced down at the ragged hole in his chest. Flickering hazard lights could be seen flashing redly within.

Although the plasma blast had vaporised the place where Gdolkin's primary heart had been, the secondary heart - the first organ he had been implanted with on his way to being made an Iron Hand Space Marine - had been replaced long ago with a bionic counterpart after an encounter with a tyranid splinter fleet on the herd-world of Hamooth. It had never let him down since and it wasn't going to let him down now.

Gdolkin's blood-clotting Larraman cells had already taken effect, sealing the wound and preventing the loss of his precious haemastamen-enhanced blood, so that he could heroically battle on. Red warning icons still flashed on the Iron-Father's visor display.

'When last we met on Herod, before the accursed Bei'bul Stone, I swore that there would be a reckoning between us. And that time has now come,' said the Iron-Father Gdolkin tested the weight of his power axe, his bionic gauntlet tightening on the haft. He took in the horn-helmeted, blood-armoured Traitor Marines waiting at the bulkhead entrance to the command cabin.

'Indeed it is. It is just as the daemons described.'

'What?' Gdolkin said before he could stop himself, momentarily taken by surprise by the Word Bearer.

'Daemons spake unto me saying that upon awakening the armoured sleepers I would confront my nemesis, risen as from death, and fulfil the destiny Chaos and the fates had set aside for me,' the Iscariot proclaimed, as if reading a passage from scripture. 'And they showed me the face of my nemesis, a face malformed by metal. Your face. That is why they brought you here, that I might claim the ultimate prize.'

How could Gdolkin, a faithful Son of Medusa, have a part to play in the schemes of the daemon gods? How could the fickle Chaos Powers have manipulated events to bring him to this time and place, at their behest?

'So it is indeed meet and right that there should be a reckoning between us, for the voice of the warp has spoken!'

In a startlingly swift and deft manoeuvre, the Word Bearer swung his mace up and round, clubbing the Iron-Father violently on the side of the head. Under the crack of the mace connecting with the visor of his helm, Gdolkin heard the pop of the environment seal being wrenched open. Gdolkin was blinded in his right eye as the connections between his ocular implant and the helmet were abruptly broken.

The Iscariot then brought the other bladed end of his crozius up with the counter-swing, allowing the momentum of the heavy head to bring it round. The serrated blade snagged under the rim of Gdolkin's helmet, and with a violent tug the Iscariot tore it from the Space Marine's head.

The two combatants faced off each other, truly face-to-face at last.

'You speak of the ultimate prize,' Gdolkin snarled, 'but you are already too late.' He smiled grimly.

'Before we are done here, this Titan will give up its unnatural life as its generarium overloads.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' the Word Bearer stated calmly and jerked a nod towards the Word Bearers still waiting at the entrance hatch. They left immediately, following the path Gdolkin's own Iron Hands had taken through the Imperator towards the god-engine's reactor core.

Gdolkin swung his axe, the Iscariot meeting his blow with the head of his mace. Sparks flew from the two weapons, one consecrated to the Machine God, one protected by the foul sorceries of Chaos.

'You think that *Deus Mortem* is the ultimate prize?' the heretic said, a sibilant hiss framing his words. The Iscariot smiled, the tip of a black forked tongue darting from between drawn bloodless lips.

'Ha!' Gdolkin declared triumphantly. 'I too thought that there was a greater prize here, warp-scum, and in that you are mistaken, just as I was.'

The snapping calliper arm reached for the Iron-Father's challenger.

'How little you know or understand,' the Iscariot said, his voice seductively soothing, his tone that of a patient parent speaking to a young child.

The crozius-mace descended, smashing into the thigh of the Iron Hand's bionic left leg. There was the crunch of buckling armour and crushed hydraulics. The Iron-Father reeled away from the Dark Apostle, to better ready himself for the next attack, already noting a drop in effectiveness in the damaged limb. The mechanical replacement was supposed to be more durable than the original, but it seemed not to be the case against the Chaos-Chaplain's accursed crozius arcanum.

'Look at all that I have wrought!' the Iscariot declared, taking in, it seemed, all of Crucible and the Araken system with his open-armed gesture. At his command Gdolkin could not stop himself glancing at the Titan hangar beyond the window-ports of the Emperor's eyes. If it had not been for his faith in the immortal Emperor the Iron-Father doubted that he would have been able to put up any resistance to the Dark Apostle's seductive insinuations.

It did not stop him from feeling confused, however. Although he was loath to admit it, the Word Bearer was right; by Mars, he didn't understand.

'All that you have wrought? All that you have left in your wake is madness and death on a global scale!'

'You do not believe me?' the Iscariot's words were like poisoned honey in Gdolkin's auditory receptors. 'It was written in the warp that all this would come to pass, and through my works I have made it so.'

Expressions of bewilderment and appalled disbelief passed across the Iron-Father's face. 'You think that I came to Crucible solely to win a Titan Legion to the Despoiler's cause?'

Gdolkin made no intelligible sound, his anger manifesting as a roar of intensely focused fury. Raising his axe he ran at the Iscariot again, determined to cut the heretic's head from his shoulders. At the last

possible moment the Dark Apostle sidestepped and deftly parried the enraged Iron I land's blow.

'No, I have a much higher purpose here. Did I not already speak of fulfilling my destiny? I knew that the day would come when my millennia of faithfulness would be rewarded, the day of my ascension, when I would join the Gods of Chaos at their right-hand.'

'Your ascension?' Gdolkin gasped.

'To glorious daemonhood, of course.' A sick smile spread across the Iscariot's features, making him look like the snarling daemon face icons adorning his blasphemous armour.

Gdolkin felt a wave of nausea wash through him and exhausted, no longer able to resist, doubled up involuntarily. It took all his strength simply to resist the Iscariot's persuasive words.

The Word Bearer forced his weapon free of the Iron-Father's axe. Gdolkin felt a sharp tug as the Apostle grabbed his servo-arm and pulled him backwards. The Iron-Father went with it, using the added momentum to throw his full weight against the corrupted Chaplain.

The Iscariot stumbled backwards himself allowing Gdolkin to spin round and bring his axe to bear again. The Iron-Father lashed out with the electric-flame edged blade. The Apostle prepared to defend himself, instinctively raising his arm in front of his face to protect himself. The blade sank into his vam-braces, cutting through the armoured plates and into the corrupted flesh beneath.

Gdolkin pulled the blade free, ready to make another strike against the heretic. Thick, black ichor oozed like oil from the cleft in the Apostle's arm, but the Iscariot behaved as if he had suffered no such wound.

The Iscariot kicked out at the Iron-Father with a servo-assisted ceramite boot, catching Gdolkin on his weakened artificial left leg. Gdolkin staggered backwards - somehow managing to block the Apostle's descending mace once again as he did so - as much from shock at what the blasphemer had revealed to him as from his physical attack.

If the Iscariot was to be believed then Gdolkin, his warriors, and even Magos Thule, had all been merely pawns in the Dark Apostle's centuries-spanning plan.

The Iron Hands had never been the masters of their own destiny at any time since they had put themselves under Thule's command. They had either been victims of the decisions of a madman or objects in the greater

game being played out by the Iscariot. But even to consider such things was weakness, a small, insistent voice declared from the back of Gdolkin's mesmerized mind.

'Who are you?' Gdolkin hissed.

'I am known by many names on many different worlds and to the cultist cells I founded there. I have been called Apostulus Bei'bul, Brother Sennar, the Word Made Flesh, and the Voice of Truth, for that is what I am. I was the Liberator of Korzius at the time of the Gothic War. I was the Wrath of Lorgar at Scourging of Anthanor. And on ancient Terra, ten thousand years ago, I was simply the Colchian.'

The Word Bearer pulled back from Gdolkin, changing his grip on his staff of unholy office.

'I was among the first of the Sons of Lorgar, among the first to realise the greatness of the Chaos Powers, true gods that deserved my veneration, not some carrion lord holding a stagnating, dying society in his deathly grip. But to you I shall be the Iscariot, the Redeemer of Araken, the master of the *Deus Mortem*, your executioner! And I know you, Iron-Father Gdolkin. My masters saw fit to warn me about you.'

The Iscariot lunged again, moving with frightening speed, thrusting with his crozius. The battle-weary Iron-Father was only just able to deflect the blow. The Apostle deftly changed hands on his weapon.

Gdolkin was not quick enough to stop the follow-up strike. The blades of the Chaos mace smashed into his side, under the guard of his axe, ripping open the ceramite plates protecting his back.

The black metal icons dangling from the chains bedecked about the Apostle's ruddy armour rattled against his own armoured greaves. Reeling from the blow the Word Bearer had dealt him, Gdolkin brought his power axe sweeping up between them. The crackling force field severed the links of several chains, the snarling daemon faces and shrunken heads of the faithless scattering across the floor of the command cabin.

'Enough of your lies, traitor!' Gdolkin roared. 'By mighty Ferrus I shall silence your blaspheming voice for good. This I vow!'

Gdolkin bowled into the Iscariot with the force of a striking comet. His neuro-1 inked servo-arm flexed, reaching for the Iscariot, but then, gears grinding, found itself trapped in the crushing gauntlet of the Word Bearer. There was a sudden, violent shearing of metal as the Apostle wrenched his arm free from the Iron-Father's armour in a welter of sparks and spurting

hydraulic fluid, trailing cabling and oil-feeds like torn tendons and ruptured arteries.

Gdolkin gasped, feeling acute physical pain from the tortured feedback as his third arm was so violently removed. He stumbled back, gulping down ragged lungfuls of air. The Iscariot turned away also, preparing his next strike.

Gdolkin grabbed his enemy with but all he managed to snatch hold of was the blood-smeared pelt hanging from the Apostle's shoulders, tearing it from its fastening and casting it angrily aside.

'We are alike, you and I,' the Iscariot said, bringing his crozius down on the Iron-Father's arm so that the armoured sleeve rang under the impact. 'We are both Chaplains, defenders of our respective faiths. We both know what it is to be driven by a zealous fervour that seizes the soul with intense, unreasoning passion!'

'We are *nothing* alike!' Gdolkin wheezed.

'Oh but we are. The only real difference is that your entire belief system is founded on a delusion. Mine is the one true faith.'

'*You are* the false believer, the blasphemer!' the Iron-Father railed.

'It is *you* who is weak,' the Iscariot suddenly roared, his voice become that of some hellish daemon of the warp, 'putting your faith in a corpse who is not worthy of your fealty! You were made - we were made - to be the best human beings can be. We are greater than mere mortal men. We are greater than the corpse-husk of the God-Emperor. We are as gods compared to mere mortals. We should transcend our humble beginnings and claim our birthright; dominion over all mankind. But you would waste that opportunity preferring to serve those you could crush beneath those Iron Hands of yours! But even we are not as mighty as the great Gods of Chaos, the Lords of Anarchy, the Masters of the Apocalypse! Death to the False Emperor! Death to the weakling Imperium of Man!'

The Chaos demagogue sprinted at Gdolkin, agilely avoiding the two halves of Magos Thule's corpse. The still burning braziers trailed thick black smoke in the Iscariot's wake. The whole command cabin was now under a pall of the vile black fog, its brimstone stink overwhelming the Iron-Father's olfactory sensors.

'You are instrumental to my plans. The gods have shown me that with your second death I shall ascend to join the ranks of the daemon princes. I

have brought billions of souls to Chaos. This day I shall claim my reward. I have waited ten thousand years and *you* shall not deny me!

The Iscariot swung his crozius but incredibly, Gdolkin managed to twist himself out of the way of the smashing mace. The heavy, metal blades destroyed a brass- and mahogany-finished console desk instead.

'For the Gods of Chaos!' the Word Bearer bellowed as he came for the Iron-Father again. 'From the fires of betrayal, unto the blood of revenge, we bring the word of Lorgar, the Bearer of the Word, the Favoured Son of Chaos. All praise be given unto him!'

The Iron-Father did not like the way the battle was going. He would not give up, but he could not risk failure just the same. His desire to be avenged on the one who had ultimately forced him to leave his homeworld in its hour of need, who had dashed his hopes of finding the primarch and who would now profane this sacred living shrine of the machine, was all that kept him battling on. Someone had to get away to warn the Imperial Warmasters of the threat that was rising on this world to challenge them and he could not be certain it would be him.

'Gdolkin to all Iron Hands aboard the *Deus Mortem*,' he intoned into his vox, unsure if any of his brethren still lived or, if they did, that they could hear him, but hoping against hope nonetheless. 'Once the fate of the Imperator is assured get away, use the teleportarium; return to the *Ajax*. Warn the Imperium. Tell them the Ironclads are coming!'

Then the Word Bearer was on him again. Gdolkin's axe dealt the snarling daemon face standing proud of the warrior-mystic's right shoulder plate a glancing blow, throwing sparks from the ceramite and adamantium. The force-field sheathing the axe-blade crackled and guttered for a moment as if threatening to short out. The droning hum of the field generator faltered, changing pitch, becoming an unpleasant whine for a moment. Then the steady, rhythmic hum returned and the blade blazed brilliant blue-white again.

The two giants battled on, trading blow for blow and blasphemy for holy declaration. Their battle took them from the Titan's bridge onto the battlements of the god-engine's shoulder weapon emplacements, and back again. There were just the two of them now, as if nothing else in the universe mattered or counted at that moment, as if the Imperium's struggle against the Despoiler's Black Crusade was brought down to this - the Iron-Father battling his nemesis, the Dark Apostle.

But of the two, it was apparent which of them was the stronger. After all that he had fought through an overwhelming weariness came over the Iron-Father.

'Give in to your fatigue. Fight no more,' the Iscariot said, as if reading Gdolkin's mind. 'Let yourself rest. You have fought for so long and so hard, and I value your effort, but cease your straggle now. Embrace your destiny. Give in. Let your weary body rest.'

The Iscariot's words created an unsettling feeling inside the Iron-Father that itched at his mind like a ripe scab. Certainly, Gdolkin did feel physically exhausted, in a way that he could not remember since before becoming a Space Marine, on his trek into the bitter lands of Medusa in search the Land of Shadow and the watchers of the Iron Hands' Chapter. But still he could not let himself give up. Somewhere a voice deep within him reminded him that to give in would be to give in to weakness; the ultimate sin.

Gdolkin raised his crackling power axe in his right hand willing every fibre and augmetic mechanism in his body to do as he commanded, so great was the effort, ready to smite his enemy a dolorous blow and pass sentence on the Iscariot.

There was a blur of movement, the tortured scream of metal on metal. With a loud clang something heavy and metallic hit the deck.

The Iron-Father only realised that the Iscariot's blow had removed the greater part of his right arm when he glanced down to see his own armoured augmetic limb lying on the deck, the crackling power axe still in the grip of the blessed Gauntlet of Menestus. Blood oozed from the atrophied muscle of the stump of his spliced elbow.

Surprisingly Gdolkin felt no pain; only rage at the sacrilege the Iscariot had done with his iconoclastic attack on a masterpiece of the artificer's art.

'Prepare to meet your maker, Iron Hand, you weakling wretch,' the Iscariot spat, true venom in his voice now blended with a tone of dark satisfaction.

Gdolkin looked up and saw the bladed Chaos mace descending towards his head, his adrenaline-heightened senses making it seem as though the crozius was falling in slow motion.

It was as if another being took control of the Iron-Father's battle-weary, grievously wounded body at that moment. Gdolkin threw himself sideways

out of the way of the falling crozius, snatching up his power axe in his left hand.

Denied his killing blow, the mace-strike not halted by the Iron-Father's splintering skull, inertia carried the Iscariot's body forwards and the heretic Chaplain stumbled forwards to maintain his balance.

'For Ferrus and the Emperor!' Gdolkin's battle-cry was a howl of soul-wrenching agony.

Putting every last iota of his strength into the action, Gdolkin brought his axe up in an almighty swing, burying the sparking blade in the Iscariot's midriff. The power weapon sliced cleanly through the Word Bearer's armour and into the flesh of his stomach. But the power axe did not stop there. The blade continued upwards, gutting the Chaos demagogue.

Gdolkin's blow physically hurled the Iscariot backwards, arms flailing. The Word Bearer came crashing down on top of the princeps throne, momentum throwing his head backwards with a whiplash jerk. Gdolkin heard a distinct wet *schluck* sound as the twenty-centimetre long spike that linked the Emperor's princeps with the Titan's mind-core punctured the base of the Iscariot's skull and thrust into the middle of Chaos-Chaplain's brain.

A look of shock froze on the Iscariot's face as his body was wracked by muscular spasms, his head transfixed on the metal spike. His mouth hung open in an expression of utter astonishment, the black snake's tongue lolling from one corner, a gargling groan barely escaping his bile-choked throat.

Iron-Father Gdolkin tried to get to his feet. Suddenly the deck disappeared from beneath his feet as the *Deus Mortem* lurched violently to life, dropping its command cabin-head forwards as it took its first shuddering step forward. The ruin of his ceramite-armoured body hurtled backwards into one of the Titan's window eye-ports and then through it, the armaglass shattering under the impact.

Gdolkin plummeted down the face of Emperor Titan, bouncing off weapon emplacements and half-sliding down the adamantium armour of its massive body.

The stump of the Iron-Father's right arm moved as his body still tried to make the missing limb grab onto something. Impulse signals from his

brain tried to move his servo-arm in an attempt to find some purchase, but that too was gone.

Gdolkin's left arm reached out, clutching desperately at anything that came within reach, doing anything he could to slow his plummeting dive. Metal fingers clutched at the skull-cyborg face of the Machine Opus, but were then pulled free again. Another desperate grab and the Iron-Father's hand closed around a jutting protrusion. Pain receptors and system sensors registered a dislocating wrench on the Iron-Father's shoulder and then almost as quickly the protrusion broke off in his fist, and his body went tumbling erratically away.

Then there was nothing but cold, rushing air between Gdolkin and the ferrocrete floor of the hangar.

Looking up towards the vaulted roof of the Emperor's alcove and the glowering metal features of the god-engine, it seemed as though the Machine God - the Ommissiah itself - had come to claim the Iron-Father's soul at the moment of his death.

FIFTEEN

ASCENSION

THE TOMB OF THE IRONCLAD

'THERE HE IS! Over there!' Brother Kansbar shouted over the chanting of the Chaos acolytes and the noise of the awakening Titans that filled the vast sepulchre.

Brother Erastus steered the tech-priest's Chimera back towards the Emperor's alcove. On escaping the Titan, the four remaining Iron Hands had found the servitor tank surrounded by the degenerate mob of the Chaos horde. All of the servitor units were now non-functional, but the override commands Iron-Father Gdolkin had introduced into the machine were still effective and the vehicle itself was still mobile.

Gunning down more of the host's mutants and traitor Guardsmen, the Iron Hands boarded the vehicle, Erastus had been able to access the steering controls. They had sped away from the feet of the Titan as the Emperor took a sudden lurching step forward.

And now, here they were rushing back into the danger zone as the *Deus Mortem* came to palsied life. Who was controlling the Titan, Caduceus wondered? And how long did the Iron Hands have before the Emperor's plasma reactor went critical? Was it possible that the Word Bearers had somehow found a way to shut it down and stop the overload? But there was no time for such questions now. Only one thing mattered: saving the their commander.

Iron-Father Gdolkin lay on the ground between the clumping, crushing feet of the monstrous war machine, the ferrocrete beneath him fractured by the impact of his falling body. At any moment he could be crushed beneath the massive hooves of the *Deus Mortem*. Caduceus could not even tell if the unmoving Iron-Father was still alive, but they had to find out; they had to try to rescue him. If nothing else, it was the Apothecary's duty to recover the progenoid glands from Gdolkin's corpse; he had been able to

save little of the Iron Hands' precious gene-seed during the battle for the tomb.

The mutants and degenerate Guardsmen were now fleeing in terror from the crushing rampage of the Emperor. Several of the Chaos devotees had become nothing more than pulped red splodges on the splintered ferrocrete floor. They certainly weren't worried about what the Iron Hands were doing any more.

Of all the warriors, adepts and servitors of the Iron Hands-Mechanicus alliance that had entered the Tomb of the Ironclad, as far as Apothecary Caduceus was aware, Brothers Kansbar, Erastus, Melchor and himself were the only known survivors, in the wake of the battle for the tomb and the Titan.

They had fought so hard to save the Titan and then they had been ordered to fight just as hard - if not harder - to bring about their destruction. They had fought their own battle to overload the generarium, gunning down incensed tech-adepts who tried to stop them fulfilling the Iron-Father's orders, and then, their work done, they had fought to escape from the doomed *Deus Mortem*, as the Word Bearers had arrived to undo the damage they had already done. The Chaos Marines were too late, of course, but they had not intended to let the Iron Hands escape unpunished.

Three of the Chaos Space Marines had taken on six of the Sons of Medusa and had proved to be formidable foes indeed. Neither the resilient Brother-Sergeant Braxus nor Brother Zuriel had survived the encounter in the close, steamy confines of the generarium chamber. But in the end, with the primarch's blessing, the Iron Hands had prevailed, Librarian Melchor managing to fry the brain of one of the traitors in its skull with a powerful psychic blast.

The whole tomb was crawling with the corrupted adepts who had entered the hangar after the deployment of the Chaos shock troops. The vast chamber was now bathed in the lights dotting the hulls of the waking Titans, banishing the darkness to the shadows of cloistered corners.

The Space Marines' transport was now only twenty metres away from the Iron-Father's prone form. Caduceus could now see that Gdolkin had lost one arm and suffered numerous other appalling injuries.

The Chimera shook as an adamantium-shod foot slammed down barely two metres away.

As Erastus swerved instinctively, a misshapen face and deformed body appeared in the transport's headlights. The Chimera hit the mutant head-on. Caduceus felt the vehicle's tracks bump twice as it went over the heretic's body, leaving nothing but a messy smear on the ground behind it.

The Chimera slewed to a halt centimetres from the Iron-Father. Kansbar and Caduceus jumped down from the transport, stumbling as another Titan foot came crashing down only five metres away. The two Marines hauled their commander's battered body on board and then they were away again.

'The teleportarium!' Caduceus commanded. 'The Iron-Father is still alive,' he added, utilising the medicae sensors built into his Apothecary's suit to carry out a rudimentary analysis of Gdolkin's vital signs. 'Just.'

Gunfire tore up the ferrocrete behind them as Erastus followed the towering rear wall of the hangar eastwards, towards the teleportarium chamber in the far corner, several hundred metres away.

The Iron Hands could hear the terrible creaking roars of the Titan behind them. There was the dull *crump* of an explosion and a shower of rubble tumbled down onto the Chimera in a cloud of rock dust. But the tank, bearing its five passengers, sped on.

They had practically reached the looming entrance to the teleportarium when the stray missile hit. Starboard tracks shredded, flying from the Chimera in a whickering shower of sharp metal shards, as the force of the explosion flipped the tank over on its port side. The five Space Marines hit the ground, rolling through into the spherical chamber as the Chimera slid to a halt across the arched portal.

Brother Kansbar recovered the fallen Steel Standard as Caduceus and Erastus picked up the still unconscious Gdolkin. Between them they carried him up the stone steps to the adamantium dais. Melchor was moving through the chamber as though in a daze.

The chamber was lit by an eldritch luminescence as the curved walls and concave ceiling reflected back the light from the bands of energy now climbing the gigantic capacitor spikes in rapid succession. The nest of cabling surrounding them, and the other pieces of esoteric equipment in the chamber, glowed with the same blue-white luminosity. Since the Iron Hands had last been here the teleportarium had charged to fully operational capability.

Caduceus and Erastus stopped at the centre of the charged dais, sensing the static dancing over their bionic components, and laid the Iron-Father at

their feet. Banner-bearer Kansbar stood beside them, the Steel Standard falling over them like a shroud. An insistent hum filled the chamber and was rising painfully in both pitch and volume. It was then that Caduceus realised that the Librarian was not with them. Melchor was standing in front of the same console bank the Iron-Father had used to activate the ancient machinery of the teleportarium.

'Melchor! By the Ommissiah, what are you doing?' the Apothecary shouted over the electrical roar filling the chamber with its sinister acoustic resonances.

'Somebody has to stay behind to coax the machine spirit into compliance.' Melchor said. The Apothecary hadn't heard the Librarian sound so animated since he had suffered the psychic scourging. 'That person must be me.'

Caduceus could hear the howls of mutants and insane cultists nearing the teleportarium chamber.

'Librarian, there must be another way! We can operate it by remote control!'

'Gdolkin could have done such a thing, but the Iron-Father is in no fit state,' the Librarian said, the very voice of reason. 'I have a lock on the *Ajax*. It is time you were gone.'

'Melchor!' Caduceus yelled as the Librarian pushed a large brass lever forwards, the mutant host pouring into the chamber he had suffered over and around the wreckage of Thule's Chimera.

'Goodbye, brothers. May Ferrus go with you.'

Four bolts of lightning tore from the tips of the pylon spears in a dazzling blaze of ice-white light, and the world, as Caduceus saw it, was lost in white oblivion.

And with you, the Apothecary found himself voicing the words silently inside his head.

There was an abrupt sensation of dislocation, that made Caduceus's stomach turn over, and then they were gone.

IN A BLAZE of agonising hyper-awareness the Imperator came to full consciousness. The paralysed warp-corrupted Titan had found its host at last.

Something that was neither the Iscariot nor the *Deus Mortem*, and yet which shared the memories and awareness of both, looked down upon the

insignificant insects crawling at its feet.

WE HAVE ASCENDED, the Iscariot-Titan thought-formed. WE ARE AS A GOD.

The Emperor flexed its iron and adamantium muscles. It strode forwards crushing dozens of the scurrying mites beneath its massive hooves. It reached out with its mighty arms, testing the power at its terrible, weapon-cannon fingertips. The Hellstorm cannon fired, immolating a score of the black-robed traitors. An energized matter blast tore from its plasma annihilator, vaporising the chainfist of a waking Warlord.

Truly was it a god of death.

But there was something wrong, a savage burning pain building within the Emperor's reactor heart. The Iscariot-Titan focused internally on itself for a moment, seeing the generarium core, the fuel rods overheating in the boiling fluid of the reactor chamber. The generarium was on the verge of overloading. The Titan's priest-thing servants were unable to do anything about the crisis, lying dead as they were at their posts.

With a single digital impulse thought the god-engine temporarily shut down all relevant systems, bringing the generarium back under its control, the conditions within the reactor core returning to within normal operational parameters.

Systems re-ignited again and the daemon machine-god strode through the hangar and on into the empty hollow halls of the Mechanicus complex, laying waste to the holy iconography of the Omnissiah wherever it found it, in an orgy of mindless destruction.

Memories flickered across the vista of the Titan's Apostle-bonded mindscape. Part of its nascent consciousness had come to place as part of some greater purpose. There was another, awaiting it, beyond the bounds of this world, a world that had grown too small to contain its zealous wrath already. It required greater arenas in which to continue its fight and satisfy its lust for blood and souls, its appetite for destruction.

The Iscariot-Titan reached out into ether, the twisting, eddying currents of the Sea of Souls surrounding the moon, cutting through the same strange esoteric fields that had interfered with vox communication on Crucible, until it found another daemon-intelligence not unlike its own.

CORRUPTER OF COLCHIS, the Iscariot-Titan psy-cast. HEED OUR CALL. WE HAVE NEED OF YOU. THE IRONCLAD LEGION AWAITS.

THE BLISTERING WHITE light faded, dazzling blurs resolving into familiar features and faces. The Iron Hands were back on the cold hard deck of the bridge of the *Astartes* cruiser *Ajax*.

'By the Ommissiah, what is going on?' Iron-Captain Strake roared, spinning round from his position at the command pulpit and gliding over to the four survivors of *Crucible*, grav units humming. The bridge was bathed in the fitful glare of flashing hazard lights. 'One minute that damned Chaos ship breaks off pursuit and then, without any prior signal - and with long-range comms down too - we lose power and you materialize here! Now! How can this be possible? I thought we were out of teleport range!' Strake paused in his tirade, staring at the Iron-Father's broken body and his three guardians in uncomprehending astonishment. 'And what of the primarch?'

The ancient teleportarium had indeed been a wonder of the Ommissiah. If only the Cult Mechanicus still had the knowledge and artifice to construct tele-ortation devices like that still.

'Crucible has fallen to Chaos.' Brother Kansbar explained succinctly.

'What happened to the commander?'

'The Iscariot happened,' a thin cracked voice croaked.

Strake, Caduceus and the others all looked to the Iron-Father again.

'Gdolk!' Strake said with rumbustious delight. 'By the Emperor, you're alive!'

Gdolk's breathing was laboured and shallow. It sounded like he was not long for this world.

'Iron-Captain Strake,' the dying Iron-Father said with deliberate intonation, so that no one might confuse what orders he had given with his last rattling breath. 'Deploy exterminatus measures.'

Strake didn't need telling twice. 'At once, Iron-Father! Launch cyclonic torpedoes!' the iron-captain bellowed across the bridge of the *Ajax*.

THE IMPERATOR STRODE through the shattered remains of the Mechanicus complex entrance portal and onto the blasted, basalt plain before the towering cliff-face. The daemon Titan's surveyor arrays could

visualise the ruddy arrowhead-silhouette of the Chaos battleship waiting in low orbit over the Mechanicus moon below the band of asteroids circling the satellite. Landing craft capable of transporting constructs as large as Titans from the surface up to the *Corrupter* were even now descending from the Word Bearers' vessel, in readiness to retrieve the newly consecrated daemon-engines of the Legio Metallum Armaturum.

With a roar like a hundred atomic warheads detonating, the *Ajax's* cyclonic torpedoes entered Crucible's atmosphere and exploded. In seconds the entire moon was swallowed up beneath a planet-razing firestorm as the very atmosphere caught fire, exploding into flame. An apocalyptic roar broke across Crucible, a sound so loud it was as though the sky itself was breaking - which it was.

A terrible chain reaction had been set in motion and nothing could now stop it. A tide of destruction swept over the moon's surface, a hundred times more devastating than anything initiated by the destruction of any of the Araken artefacts.

No other sound could be heard as the apocalyptic firestorm raged across Crucible, sweeping away all before it, not the screams of the melting Chaos host as the air in their lungs caught fire, not the roar of the Titan transporters as they were incinerated, nor the frustrated bellowing of the possessed Emperor.

The nuclear fires enveloped the Iscariot-Titan, its void shields burning out in a few seconds. Its adamantium armour held out just long enough for the Emperor to suffer agonising pain on a deific level, as only a god can, before it too was utterly destroyed, its immortal body melting under the unimaginably fierce heat. Its reactor core exploded with the force of a small sun going nova.

The *Corrupter of Colchis* fired its plasma drives again, as the atmosphere of the moon beneath it became a roiling sea of molten fire, desperately trying to pull clear while it still could. But even the mighty seven-kilometre long vessel that had fought the Long War for ten thousand years could not escape the satellite-wide inferno. Void shields failed, engines caught fire and the plasma drives detonated. The warp-thing dwelling at the heart of the *Corrupter* within the sarcophagus of the ancient Word Bearers' battleship screamed its frustrations to the warp with the soul-searing death-scream of a billion devoured souls.

The wrath of the Emperor and the Omnissiah was terrible indeed.

As Crucible died, one lone hull-battered strike cruiser powered away from the dying moon. Silhouetted against the backdrop of the sea of molten fire enveloping the Mechanicus outpost world, the ship set course for the borders of the Araken system and was swallowed by the eternal darkness of the void.

MEDUSA

'In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war.'

- Anon

EPILOGUE

MAN-MACHINE

THE SUNDERED PLAIN, THE PLANET MEDUSA

THE FINAL BATTLE for Medusa had begun.

The heretic armour squadrons moved with ominous purpose across the fractured grey ground of the Sundered Plain. The enemy echelons powered forward in their thousands, the toxic mist swirling around the tanks, revealing the Chaos graffiti covering the armoured hulls, cannon turrets and gun sponsons. There was no mistaking where the loyalties of the excommunicated Haradni 13th Heavy Armoured Regiment now lay.

The slayer-tanks had disgorged from fat black drop-ships that descended on the Sundered Plain like flies settling on a corpse. The ground shook at their coming, as if the temperamental tectonic plates of the planet were undergoing some devastating seismic shift once again, as if Medusa was trying to shake the heretic scum from her hide.

Arrayed for ten kilometres across the plain before the heretic tanks was the imposing line of the massed clan companies' gargantuan tracked fortress-monasteries; living mountains that rolled inexorably towards the invaders, a deep throbbing ramble accompanying their advance that added to the vibrations of the enemy armour. The noise was so great that it felt

like the Sundered Plain could fissure open again at any moment and swallow every single one of them.

The might of the land-behemoths was awesome indeed. Looking like vast mobile ziggurat cities, each commanded firepower equivalent to the mighty ordinated engine *Gehenna*. When the fortress-monasteries moved it was as if the very landscape of the Chapter-world had come to terrible life, Medusa herself opposing the Chaos invasion.

The Iron Hands had come together as a Chapter once more to defend their homeworld. This battle would be recorded in the histories of the Imperium as one of the most momentous fought during the dark days of the Despoiler's Thirteenth Black Crusade. It was certainly the most pivotal of the battles the Iron Hands had fought against the attacking hordes of Abaddon's armies and would undoubtedly form the climax of the battle to keep Medusa for the Iron Hands.

The Iron Hands were risking all with this last desperate stratagem. Concentrating all their might in this one battle gave them their best chance of victory over the enemy and rid Medusa of the armoured invaders. But it also meant that if their dangerous gambit failed then their power would be broken; there would be no one else to continue the battle for Medusa and the Iron Hands' Chapter would effectively be wiped out in one foudri sloop by the Arch-Fiend's armies.

But they would not fail; they could not fail. Failure was the manifestation of weakness and they were Iron Hands, who did not tolerate weakness in any form and would not allow themselves to succumb to it.

The dark, polluted landscape of Medusa had become host to one of the largest gatherings of armoured might since the Battle of Tallarn. The scale of the final battle for Medusa would reflect the grandeur and importance of this world for the Iron Hands' Chapter. If they lost this they lost everything. But if they won this day then Medusa would be rid of its Chaos invaders and the Sons of Ferrus would be free to take the fight to the enemy at the gates of Fortress Cadia.

Medusa might not be the kindest, most beatific of parents but it had played its part in making the Sons of Ferrus the mighty warriors they were today. The planet had a harsh beauty for those who could see it, the grey-brown smog-clouds streaked with coral and gold, under-lit with flashes of sapphire and quicksilver from the crackling electrical storms raging far to the north.

A long, loud carynx-horn cry sounded through the polluted fog and perpetual gloom of the Medusan sky, a mournful howl that dulled the sounds of the keening wind and the relentless rambling of the heretic tanks.

As the siren sound came to an end the fortresses' guns opened fire with an apocalyptic roar, like the cataclysmic crack of doomsday itself, and a hundred Haradni tanks were obliterated by the opening salvo.

Hatches and bulkheads opened all over the land-behemoths. In their midst was the goliath *Weyland* of the Vurgaan clan. Flights of jump pack-equipped Assault Marines streamed from its crenellated battlements whilst squadrons of black-armoured attack bikes and land speeders swept out of the shadows cloaking the gargantuan caterpillar tracks of the land-behemoth, supported by the mailed fist of the Iron Hands' own armour: Predator Annihilators, Destructors, Vindicators, Land Raiders and Whirlwinds.

A disembarkation ramp dropped open with a clang. The venerable warrior stood at the threshold looking out over the battle-riven plain before him, the flashes of weapons fire and cannons discharging illuminating the semi-darkness of the battlefield, under-lighting the pall of filthy pollution shrouding the scene of the Iron Hands' last stand. As the colossus surveyed the vista of distant frozen mountain ranges, the bleak wilderness of the plain and the Sons of Ferrus Manus engaging the Haradni 13th his massive, metal body rotated on the swivel-mechanism of his pivot-waist.

The magnificent black-armoured body of the dreadnought gleamed in the light of the conflict raging across the plain before the Land-Behemoth *Weyland*. The right-hand panel of the dreadnought's adamantium casing bore the raised image of a clawed iron gauntlet, the millennia-old insignia of his order. The monstrous power fist, like some industrial grapple, that with its built-in storm bolter formed the dreadnought's left arm, was not unlike the image of the bas-relief representation. The right arm of the machine was just as imposing and terrible, being a twin-linked lascannon. The name once inscribed upon the ornamental scrollwork beneath the sculpted angel adorning the dreadnought's sarcophagus was "Talumech".

But Venerable Dreadnought Talumech had fallen early in the battle for Medusa, attempting to repel the constant attacks of the Chaos forces that the planet had been subjected to from the earliest phase of the Despoiler's

Black Crusade. But he had died a hero's death. Two hundred cultist soldiers died at his feet before a Chaos psyker-blast had rent open the adamantium shielding of his armour's interface sarcophagus and what little was left of Talumech's flesh and blood form spontaneously combusted, and with his death-throes, the twin-linked lascannon blew the psyker-witch's head apart.

Talumech's iron body had been recovered from the peak on which it stood, had been repaired and reconsecrated, ready to receive the next Iron Hand deemed worthy of the ultimate honour the Chapter could bestow on one of its battle-brothers.

Learning of Iron-Father Gdolkin's noble sacrifice and great victory over the Word Bearers of the Iscariot, the Garrsak clan had gifted the ancient dreadnought carcass to the Vurgaan clan company so that he might live again to mete out the Emperor's justice to those who defied His Holy Will, and fulfil the Iron-Father's promise that while he still lived Medusa would not fall.

Dreadnought Gdolkin marched down the metal ramp ready to call down the divine retribution of the Emperor and his holy son, Ferrus Manus, upon the heads of the enemy ranged before him; an unstoppable killing machine, three times the height of a man, the ultimate fusion of the biological and the mechanical.

He was now one of only eight such dreadnought-brothers in the whole of the Iron Hands' Chapter. He had ascended. He was now the epitome of that which every Iron Hand wished one day to become, a revered and highly esteemed, devoted warrior-champion of the Emperor, continuing the long war against His enemies forevermore.

Gdolkin had achieved the ambition which few iron-brothers dared hope would be their fate. Through battle and bravery he had earned the right to be bonded to a machine until the end of his days, effectively made immortal.

Dreadnought Gdolkin charged into the raging heart of the battle with grinding servo-assisted strides, las-cannon blazing and storm-bolter screaming, his booming metallic-toned voice declaring the greatness of the primarch and proclaiming the glory of the Emperor with every crunching step.

Unalloyed joy, an expression of euphoric excitement blazed in his heart. Having given his life to defeat the Iscariot on lost Crucible in the distant

Araken system he had been reborn as an ancient avatar of the Omnissiah itself.

It felt good to be bonded to the dreadnought armour, the lascannon blazing into life at an impulse-thought. It felt good to be dispensing the Emperor's divine judgement against the heretic horde, fighting to stem the tide of Chaos filth that threatened to overwhelm not only the Iron Hands' homeworld but also the entire Imperium.

And it felt good to be back on Medusa, fighting for the world that had given him everything - that had birthed him, that had hardened him, that had made him a warrior and then an Iron Hand of the Adeptus Astartes. That after he had died had birthed him again into the awe-inspiring body of a dreadnought.

He owed Medusa everything, and he would give everything to keep it safe from the predations of Chaos. Dreadnought Gdolkin swore it, by the primarch, by the Emperor and by the mother-world herself. Medusa would not fall.