

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

OVERFIEND

DAVID ANNANDALE



STORMSEER • SHADOW CAPTAIN
FORGE MASTER

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

OVERFIEND

STORMSEER



SHADOW CAPTAIN



FORGE MASTER



DAVID ANNANDALE



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

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE 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.

OVERFIEND



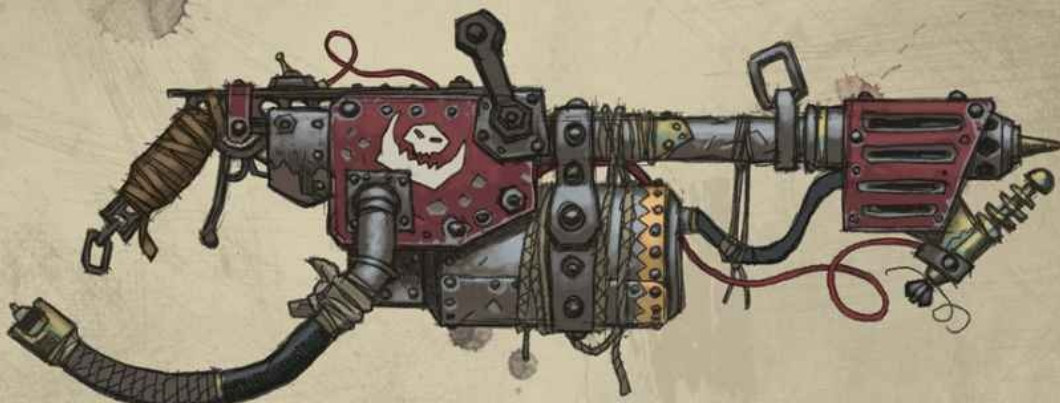
ORK KILL KROOZER. THESE RAMSHACKLE HULKS
ARE THE BANE OF THE IMPERIAL NAVY.

*Right arm chain-blade is too massive.
Should rip arm off at first use.*

Cannons on left arm. Unclear how ammunition is fed to them.

*Construction appears haphazard. That it has
succeeded makes this engine an abomination
and extremely dangerous.*





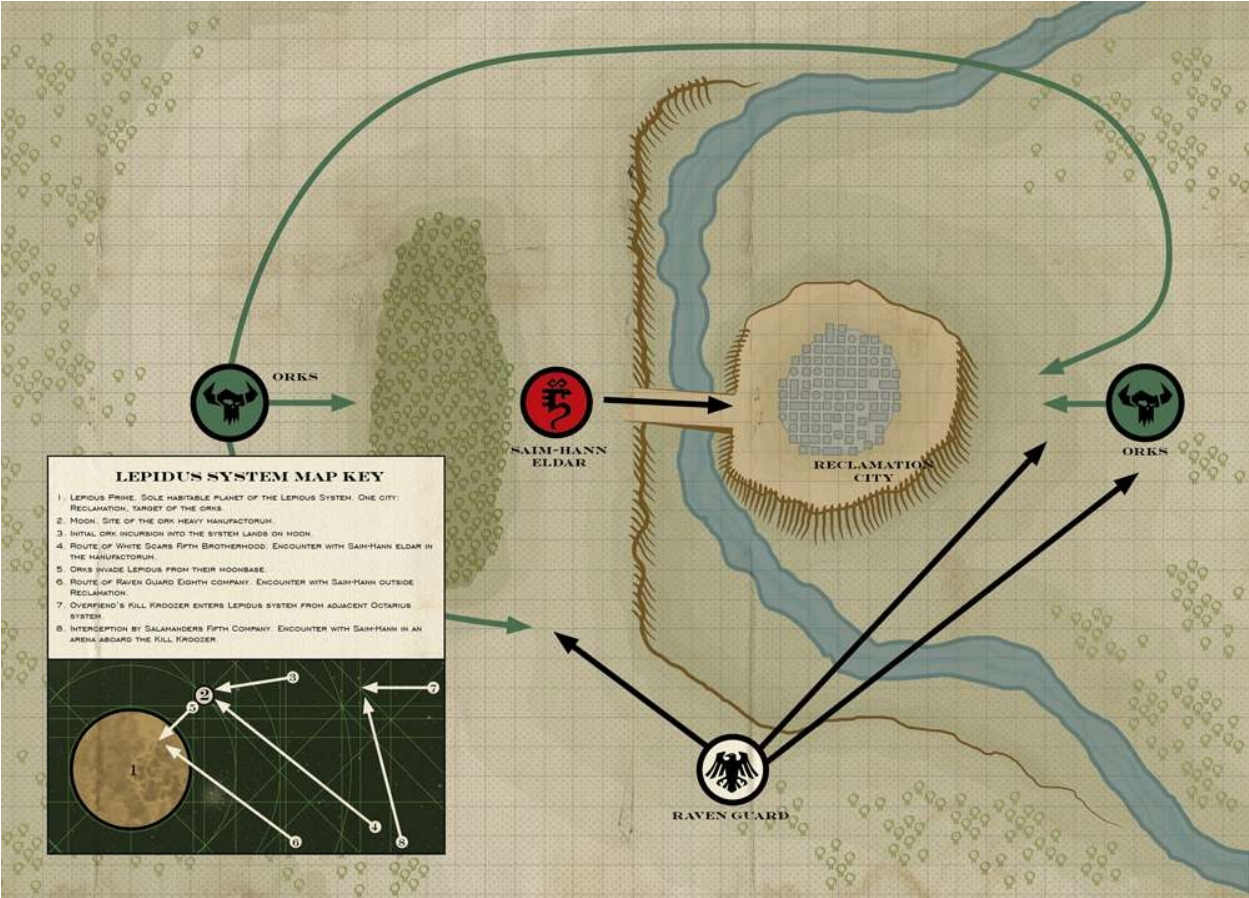
Design of these flamer variants is mad. Too much promethium, too large a spray, no safeguards. Baffling that they do not immolate their users.

The framework holds eldar psykers prisoner and is networked. How can it neutralize and exploit their power at the same time?



Control surfaces, channelling mechanically produced energy to harvest psychic power. Means unknown. Such a transfer defies sense.

Teleportation platform. Its range and accuracy are disturbing.









STORMSEER



PROLOGUE

And so they had his brother too.

Merentallas strained against his shackles. There was no point to his struggle. The ork bindings were as solid as they were crude. All he did was sink the metal into his flesh and come close to dislocating his shoulders, but the psychic agony of knowing that, in another system, Elisath had been taken by the ork warlord's flagship demanded expression. He could howl his desperation, or he could pull against his bonds. So he struggled. He struggled, in the painful twisting of his body, to push away the despair that closed around his mind.

He failed. The despair was as strong as the ork metal, as oppressive as the walls of the underground cave. With Elisath prisoner, the orks, whether they knew it or not, had taken a great step towards a terrible victory. The eldar's great fear was coming to pass. The humans had withdrawn from what they called the Octarius system, deciding to do nothing more than observe the conflict between the orks and the tyranids from a distance, hoping for mutual annihilation. They didn't understand. They didn't realise that the only possible outcome of that war was a strengthening of both species as they honed their rage and adaptability on each other.

For the moment, the tide of the war was with the tyranids. The orks were spilling out of Octarius, set upon conquering new systems. And so they had come to this one. There were strategic rationales for them to do so, but there was another reason too. He prayed that the orks were unaware of it. Only he and Elisath knew the full secret of what gift the orks could find here. It was the secret he had come to remove. He had seen the danger. The Saim-Hann had acted.

The cruiser Serpent's Strike was faster and more manoeuvrable than anything

the orks possessed. It came to the Lepidus system to scour it of the beasts. Instead, it fell to their numbers. The Overfiend's ships came at it relentlessly. Many died, but there were always more, and more, and more. The orks boarded at multiple points. They came straight for him. He and his kin fought hard. In the image of their ship, they killed many of the invaders. Like the cruiser, they could not kill enough. Merentallas could foresee the attacks, but there were too many, and they were too concerted, for advance knowledge to do any good. Barricaded on the bridge, cornered, deprived of the space to deploy with speed, the Saim-Hann of the Serpent's Strike made their last stand.

The orks took the doors down with high explosives. Massive brutes in thick armour barrelled through the burning entrance. The eldar cut the first two down, but again there were more. And behind them, something worse. It registered upon the skein of time as a dark, nomadic tangle. Merentallas couldn't get a proper reading on it. He couldn't formulate a counter. Then the bridge filled with fire and shock, and it was all too late.

The orks had taken him. And now they had Elisath too.

The orks didn't fully understand the prizes they held. That was the only consolation. It was too small a glimmer to count as hope. It was only a matter of time before the orks discovered what they held. They had taken the moon. They were taking the planet. They would find the secret. It would already be affecting them.

And then these orks would shatter the galaxy.

The lighting in the chamber flashed brighter. The shadowed figure that had doomed him on the *Serpent's Strike* snarled something. The ork working the devices cackled with brutish delight. Merentallas caught a glimpse of energy arcing on the back of a hulking shape, and then felt the electric surge as a violent prickling of his flesh. The electrodes in the band around his skull came to life, stabbing their energy into his brain. He writhed again, involuntarily this time. The pain was a spike driven from the back of his skull to his forehead as power was forced to flow *out*. It was the power that defined him. His very identity was being torn from him by savage technology, reducing him to an energy source.

Blinded by the pain, shocked into near unconsciousness, his awareness floated out onto the skein. He tried to think. He brushed along the tangled weave of moments to come. For all their interconnections and contingency, there was also a dreadful unity here, all those moments moving together to a single end, a cataract plunging to doom. And he could do nothing.

Except. He could see a possibility. It was a thin thread, easily broken by the

vicissitudes of war and the ignorance of those upon whom it depended. But it was there, a potential course of events that might deny the orks the victory that they themselves could not consciously anticipate. Merentallas could not influence events. He could not change this potential into the actual. But if the players upon whom it depended played their parts as they should, then a moment would come when he would have a choice. It would be a poor choice, one evil or another. But it would be his to make. It would be an action, and one of the evils was lesser. The thought of bringing it about would have made him weep, if the machine that grasped him had allowed him that luxury.

The greater evils approached him. The mirage of hope faded. The two orks loomed over him, each the bringer of a different sort of pain. They grinned at him, and got to work.

The White Scars strike cruiser *Legnica* was in sight when the visions came for Ghazan again.

The figure of darkness and lightning, a brute mass of savagery and lethal cunning. The swirl of power, of reality bending, twisting, collapsing into a fury of energy. The figure hurling the nova rage through shattering worlds. Ghazan standing against the foe. The battlefield a confusion of up and down, a vortex of metal, of gears and pistons, of destruction given mechanical form and fate become a grinding clockwork. Ghazan launching his own attack. A war of storm against storm. Thunder speaking with the voice of destiny. Battles and worlds teetering in the balance.

The figure of darkness and lightning must be stopped.

The Stormseer blinked. The visions receded for the moment, waves pulling back before another crash. His surroundings clicked back into place. He was once again in the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk, looking out the viewing block as the *Legnica* drew nearer. He was the lone passenger.

The visions had left Ghazan alone during the bulk of the voyage, though it was their power that had impelled his journey in the first place. He had been headed to join the defence of the next system when the revelation had burst upon him. The White Scar had a destiny here, instead, on the moon of Lepidus Prime. The Sixth Brotherhood's frigate *Talskar Pride* had dropped out of the warp at the Lepidus Mandeville point, sending him by gunship to the Fifth Brotherhood's strike cruiser now closing in on the moon.

The Lepidus system was a small target for the greenskins. The uninformed might have thought it unworthy of the confrontation that was building within

sight of its sun. Only Lepidus Prime and its moon were habitable. The rest of the planets were either gas giants or cold rocks shrouded by toxic gases. Human colonisation was so recent that the only permanent establishment was a large city on Lepidus Prime.

A small enough prize. Yet the orks had committed major resources to taking it. And the Imperium had responded with forces from three Chapters of Space Marines: the White Scars, the Raven Guard, and the Salamanders. The orks were spilling out of Octarius in numerous directions, but Lepidus was a near neighbour to Octarius, and in turn was the gateway to a series of densely populated Imperial systems. If it fell, the orks would have an easy resupply point, free of the tyranids, from which to mount further invasions. Lepidus was key to the spread of the ork empire, and key to ending that spread.

Ghazan knew that the hope, hatched in the grand war rooms where the Imperial Navy and the captains of the Adeptus Astartes plotted strategy, was that if the orks wanted Lepidus badly enough, and if they were hurt badly enough, then the Overfiend itself would attack the Imperial forces. This would give the Imperium the chance to end the greenskin menace in the subsector once and for all.

Ghazan held definite views about this hope. Though he had not spoken to him yet, he suspected that so did Temur, the khan of the Fifth Brotherhood, tasked with taking back the moon alongside the 64th Regiment of the Mordian Iron Guard. Ghazan could believe in a strong blow being dealt against the Overfiend. He *did* believe in the necessity of preserving Lepidus. But the talk of ending the threat came from the mouths of admirals who had been removed so long from the front lines that they had become more politician than warrior. Did they imagine the orks and the tyranids would remain contained within the Octarius system indefinitely? Very likely they did. It was an illusion that allowed them to sleep at night, and so they chose to act as if it were a reality.

To be a Stormseer, a *zadyin arga*, meant having a much more firm hold on the hard edges of reality. That was true, he knew, for all Space Marine Librarians. He and the other brothers of his calling had an added responsibility, though. The *zadyin arga* were the guardians of the spirituality of the White Scars. Grasping the soul of the Chapter brought visions, and to parse those visions, to understand the path along which they dictated he must ride, it was necessary to view the undreamed world all the more clearly. It meant piercing the false visions that tried to disguise that world. Hopes and wishes and lies were the raw material of those illusions. So were names.

Octarius. The name was a lie, a veneer of Imperial nomenclature that had come into use at the very time that the Imperium had had to abandon the system entirely to its warring monsters. To call it *Octarius* was to attempt, by naming alone, to lay a claim where none was possible. But Ghazan remembered. The subjects of the Imperium had declared the planet Orrok home. Perhaps the names had come to echo their doom too closely, a reminder of the conquest by the orks. So now the system was *Octarius*, and there was rarely a mention of the colony that had been lost centuries before.

Such pretence was not helpful to Ghazan. It clouded the context in which his visions appeared. So he did his best to identify the bad faith that surrounded this mission. He focused on what he and his brothers were here to do, and interpreted the visions in terms of the bearing they might have on the mission, and not the web of hopes and political expediency in which the mission existed.

Such rigour also demanded he be honest with himself. He had to guard against his own desire for a universe that was better than it was. Applying that honesty meant admitting that he had come to Lepidus for reasons that extended beyond the success of the mission. There were personal ones. His own destiny awaited him somewhere on the surface of that moon.

Unbidden, the question came: *Are you being honest?*

Yes. Yes, I am.

Your coming here is destined. There is no free will. You have no choice.

Choice. The word was a thorn, stabbing at his certainty. Duty was not a choice, and that was no cause for discomfort. But the means by which duty was performed, there was choice there. Strategy was all about choice, and the khan was facing difficult ones. Did Ghazan see himself as freed or bereft of the need to decide? Were his visions so definite in their meaning that his every important action, up to the moment of his death, was preordained?

He set the questions aside. They remained in the back of his mind, gnawing.

Through the viewing block, Ghazan could see the ship and the moon. The sense of imminence rose up, more powerful than ever. The beat of his hearts sped up even as his breathing slowed to a trance-induced somnolence. His mind's eye filled with the rage of the battlefield. He was swept up in a torrent of images. They were momentary fragments. Some were concrete: a ceramite gauntlet crushing a snarling green face to pulp, screaming humans squashed beneath monstrous treads. Others were abstract: the shape and sound of combat and loss, a synaesthesia of colour, angle and noise.

From the centre of the images came the prophecy. A figure appeared. Its shape

was ill-defined, but bestial. It reached out for him, and in its hands were the naked energies of creation and destruction. His soul rushed to meet the enemy. They clashed in an exultation of war.

The visions ended. Ghazan blinked, steadying himself in the here-and-now once more. He was right to have come. Something was waiting for him on the moon. It was eager for his arrival.

He would make it regret that wish.



CHAPTER ONE

And then there were more ork tanks.

They hadn't been there a minute before. Temur Khan had expected their arrival, but he wasn't pleased to be correct. There had been two Battlewagons: one that the Iron Guard had managed to destroy as it closed in on the walls of the bastion, the other, further to the rear of the ork force, taken out by a well-placed melta bomb slapped onto its side by Temur himself as he and his command squad stormed past it on their bikes. For several minutes, the riders of the Fifth Brotherhood had torn across the ork ranks, taking the greenskins apart with bolter and power lance, grinding them to muck beneath the wheels of the bikes. They blunted the ork advance. Forward of the White Scars incursions, many of the brutes turned back, enraged, to try to close with the Space Marines. Those who continued to rush forwards to scramble up the slope towards the bastion were cut down by the disciplined, unceasing fire of the Iron Guard.

The White Scars' tactic was perfectly calculated to disrupt the orks: a harrying attack that killed momentum by sowing confusion and forcing the enemy to expend energy in conflicting directions. It succeeded. The orks' vast numbers began to work against them. They became a mob afflicted by colliding currents. Temur wanted their advance transformed into a whirlpool, a confusion of rapids breaking into foam against the rocks of the Fifth Brotherhood. For those several minutes, he saw that configuration form. He saw the greenskins' excuse for order break down.

Several minutes of apparent progress. Several minutes during which Temur *knew* all that progress would be reversed, while he hoped to be completely wrong. But then the tanks were there, appearing just over the rise to the north, only a few hundred metres away. Even over the baying of the greenskins, he

should have been able to hear the approaching clamour of the Battlewagon engines. But he hadn't. The vehicles were just suddenly *there*.

This was not speed or stealth. This was something else.

He had been proven right, but everything else was wrong. The entire tenor of the battle was wrong. The White Scars and the Iron Guard had come to purge the orks from the moon. But now the Imperial forces were the ones besieged.

The reversal was not due to tactical error. Temur had a powerful rapid strike force to command: six combat bike squads, three of them supported by multi-melta-equipped attack bikes, five Land Speeders, one assault squad, and a five-man Scout squad. And they had chosen their staging area well. The STC bastion elements had been dropped to a plateau that had a commanding position, its peak higher than anything else for a dozen kilometres in every direction. The bastion's core was a squat, crenellated tower, crowned by a lascannon turret. The tower and the sectioned walls were constructed of prefab iron components and reinforced plasteel.

Within the perimeter were the landing pads for the two Thunderhawks, the *Furious Lightning* and the *Khajog's Stand*. The bastion was a dark grey judgement upon the landscape, its outer barrier a hundred metres long on each side. Where, an hour before, there had been nothing, now there was the stamp of Imperial strength. But the bastion was designed as a beachhead, a powerful mustering point out of which would radiate the assault. It was, in its intent, a weapon, not a defence. If a siege was to take place, it was to be undertaken by the forces that were sent out from the fortress.

But the greenskins had no interest in Imperial war doctrine. The ground rose in a series of swells to the north, and it was from that direction that the orks had come. They had arrived just as the bastion had been completed, but before the White Scars had been able to scout out the ork positions. The watch in the bastion was able to see the dust kicked up by the greenskin infantry from a fair distance, but not the tanks. The heavy support kept arriving on the field as if from nowhere.

The implications were dark. And Temur resented fighting a defensive battle. That was a game for the Imperial Fists. But unless they could ease the orks' pressure on the bastion, the White Scars would be stymied, their mission stalled. He had expected to encounter the greenskin tanks. That was why he was here: the orks were producing heavy vehicles on the moon, and sending them down to the surface of Lepidus Prime.

What was unexpected was the suddenness of their arrival. Temur's philosophy

of war was offended by tanks, especially the lumbering, ungainly behemoths slapped together by the orks, hitting a conflict with the impact and suddenness of drop pods. Lookouts and augurs were useless. The ork machines arrived as if they had been spat out by the warp.

Four Battlewagons. Unbelievable. Huge, clanking, roaring monstrosities. Spewing black exhaust, they chewed the ground beneath them as they descended the slope, rumbling their way towards the plateau and the bastion. They didn't look built so much as *assembled*. They were patchwork metal horrors. There was no consistency between the machines, and barely any evidence of rational thought. They were fantasies of violence. Their hulking chassis bristled with spikes and guns and secondary cannons. Their fronts had been fashioned into faces that were blades and battering rams.

Two of the tanks moved faster. They appeared to be armoured transports, overflowing with hooting orks. The other two had massive cannons. They started firing the moment they appeared, even though the bastion was still out of range. The shells fell short, blowing up the orks' own front ranks. The surviving orks responded with delighted laughter. Instead of creating more disorder, the friendly fire seemed to invigorate the forward elements, and the orks charged once more.

Temur emerged from the greenskin mass, his armour and bike drenched with xenos blood and pulped flesh. Stray bullets flew past him and careened off his ceramite. But the masses that had been raging for his blood had lost interest. They wanted the bastion. The Battlewagons were giving them focus. Temur cursed, then spoke into his vox-bead. 'Brother Tokhta,' he said. 'A lesson needs to be taught.'

'Understood.'

Moments later, Temur saw the Thunderhawk *Furious Lightning* take off from the bastion.

He switched to a company-wide channel. 'Brothers,' he said, 'we need to strike the enemy armour with a mighty fist. I want the greenskins demoralised and broken. Land Speeders, take the forward tanks. Bikes, the ones to the rear. Assault squad, the central mass. Use the *Furious Lightning* as our cue. Let's show them the truth of a sudden arrival.'

Temur likened the deployment to the snap of a steel-jawed trap. The bikes that had been scything through the ork mass pulled away and rode towards the back of the ork horde. Temur watched the sky, tracking the flight of the gunship. It came in low, screaming the rage of a storm, and unleashed punishment on the orks. The other White Scars attacked at the same moment. Blows from the front,

the sides, the rear, and from above. Steel jaws. *Snap*.

The Thunderhawk began with its twin lascannons, scorching a furrow through the orks, leading up to the first Battlewagon. Then it switched to its battle cannon. The shell struck the ork machine head-on. The brutes who had been hanging on to the tank's profusion of metal projections, riding it like ticks, flew away in chunks. Flames erupted from inside, yet the tank kept going, gears screaming against each other. Smoke poured from the front as if the beast were a wounded dragon.

The orks did not abandon their ride. If it had not exploded, then there was nothing wrong with it. Gunfire stabbed upwards at the *Furious Lightning* as it passed overhead. Rooftop turrets tracked its flight, but it was already streaking on to its next prey. Its lascannons never stopped firing. Tokhta was going to cut the ork army in half with a line of flame. He loosed Hellstrike missiles at the second Battlewagon, and was on to the next before the rockets struck.

The hit was perfect. The explosion was massive, engulfing the tank, and then redoubling in force as the vehicle erupted. Fireballs grew out of each other. The orks in the vicinity scattered, burning and howling. Flaming wreckage rained down in a wide area. With it, as if born from the same fire, came the jump-packed assault squad, deploying from the Thunderhawk.

The White Scars landed in the middle of the orks, justice lashing out from the dark of the night sky. Each warrior killed dozens of greenskins in a wide swath around his landing area, then rose up to come down again, repeated hammerblows striking the orks. Eddies of confusion rippled out from each strike point. The advance was slowing again.

In the growing disorder, five Land Speeders hit the orks head on. They skimmed barely two metres above the ground, so fast it was as if they were trying to outrace the shells from their heavy bolters. They ploughed more furrows into the ork lines. They decapitated the greenskins who were foolish enough to stand tall and roar a challenge. They closed with the wounded tank with krak missiles from their Typhoon launchers.

Temur observed the first blows of the steel jaws as he and his bike squads approached the rear elements and the two remaining tanks. He saw the flashes and explosions, and he heard the reports over the vox. He thought, *Good, good, good*. The orks could throw their heavy armour at them, but the White Scars were still going to smash this assault.

The bike squads came in from two sides. The ones on the east side were targeting the same tank as the *Furious Lightning*. Temur led the assault from the

west. The twin bolters of the bikes cut a path through the savage masses, heading straight for the tank. The orks responded more quickly, firing back with inaccuracy but wild abandon. Temur jinked the bike left and right. At this speed, riding over bodies, colliding with orks in primitive armour, he risked overturning. He only went faster. With his helmet on, he could not feel the rush of wind against his face, but he saw the smear of enemies falling in his wake, and he felt every jolt and bump of his hurricane ride.

The Battlewagon was just ahead now. And the Thunderhawk launched more Hellstrikes at the other tank. Another snap of the jaws—

No.

At the moment the *Furious Lightning* fired, the ork machine put on a burst of speed. It surged forwards. The rockets flashed past it, blowing up scores of foot-soldiers behind. For a second, the Battlewagon claimed the initiative.

A fatal second. The tank's cannon fired. The exuberant, excessive, overpowered shell struck the gunship's starboard wing.

The explosion lit the night, an evil sun. The ablative ceramite armour should have been proof against a single shell. The titanium rolled plates should have held. But it was as if this shell had been blessed by a ravening spirit of war. The wing sheared off. It tumbled end over end to the ground, killing more orks with flames and crushing steel. The *Lightning* went into a spiral. Its remaining engine roared as Tokhta fought to stabilise the flight.

There was nothing he could do. The gunship's death was inevitable. Still, it fought hard against the end. The engine's howl became a cry for vengeance. Wounded, burning, the Thunderhawk spun around its own axis and slammed to earth in a steep diagonal. The impact was storm and earthquake. The battlefield shook. Flames washed over the orks. As it died, the ship took a phalanx of greenskins with it.

The final retaliation meant nothing. The orks' collective shout of celebration was deafening.

The stern of the *Furious Lightning* was on fire, but the fuselage was still intact. The Battlewagon closed in.

No, Temur thought. *No, by the winds and by the earth, no!* The tide would not turn like this. But there was nothing he could do. He saw only enough of the disaster to know what had happened. He was committed to his own attack, now seconds away.

'Thunderhawk down, providing assistance,' said a voice over the combat channel. It was Ghazan, leading the western charge.

‘Punish the greenskins’ temerity, Stormseer,’ Temur told him.
‘I will, khan, and more.’

Ghazan split up the squad. He and Brother Kaidu veered off towards the fallen gunship while Sergeant Qaraqan led Ulagan and Boralun against the tank. He urged even more speed from his bike. The Thunderhawk was a prone target for the Battlewagon’s giant gun.

The cannon fired again just before Ghazan reached the *Lightning*. The shell fell short, but not by much. The blast threw up a cloud of earth that half covered the wreck. Then Ghazan and Kaidu were at the front of the ship, on the port side, opposite the tank’s approach. The nose had dug itself into the ground. The primary access ramp was crumpled and half-buried. There would be no extraction that way.

‘Brother Tokhta,’ Ghazan voxed. ‘Are you still with us?’

Static at first, but then a volley of pained curses.

‘Sounds like he is,’ said Kaidu. They dismounted, leaving their bikes close to the fuselage.

The cannon thundered again, but at a different target. Ghazan heard the stutter of a bike’s bolters. Qaraqan’s attack was under way. The bike weaponry wouldn’t be enough to pierce the tank’s armour, but it was drawing the attention of the ork gunners, buying some time. Only a matter of seconds, though. The crash had killed scores of orks, but their comrades were rushing forwards to swarm over the prize, heedless of the possibility of being blown up by their own armament.

The secondary access hatch was also inoperable. Ghazan looked at the slope of the ruined bow. ‘Let’s climb,’ he said. He and Kaidu scrambled up. To the north, they were exposed to the Battlewagon’s cannon, but it was still trying to hit closer targets. From the east, west and south, the orks rushed towards the *Furious Lightning*. A sea of green savagery was coming to drown them. The orks fired as they ran, filling the air with bullets. In less than a minute, the wave would crash against the gunship.

The Thunderhawk’s forward armourglass windshield had been blown out by the impact. Tokhta was visible inside, pinned by crushed metal.

‘How are you faring, brother?’ Ghazan asked over the vox.

‘Left arm, leg, and ribs broken,’ the pilot answered. ‘No leverage.’

Kaidu dropped inside and began hauling the wreckage away. Ghazan turned to hold back the orks. As he did, he thought through another problem. They could

not leave the *Furious Lightning* to be desecrated by the xenos. He thought of a possible solution. It was lunatic.

My destiny lies elsewhere, he thought. *So this will certainly work*. He didn't think anyone else would appreciate the humour. He barely did himself.

'Can you ride, brother?' he asked Tokhta. His staff in one hand, he opened fire with his bolt pistol with the other, blasting at the orks that came near his and Kaidu's bikes. He ignored the ones on the other side of the gunship for now.

'If I can breathe, I can ride.'

Good. 'Are there any jump packs aboard?'

'In the troop compartment, yes.'

'Brother Kaidu, I'll need one.' He maglocked the pistol, pulled a frag grenade from his belt and tossed it into the horde. The explosion hurled broken orks into the air. He had the pistol back in hand and was firing again before the bodies landed. Corpses accumulated in a semi-circle around the bikes. The greenskins on his side of the Thunderhawk slowed down and started shooting at him. Their bullets were no match for his armour. But behind these orks came their slower, larger, more heavily-armoured brothers.

'Is that wise, Stormseer?' Kaidu asked.

'No, but it is necessary. Do hurry.'

A massive ork in clanking armour leapt up onto the *Lightning's* nose. It took a bolter shell in the chest. The hit damaged the armour, but the ork kept coming, its forward momentum unaffected. Ghazan blinked at the greenskin's strength. He had never seen an ork able to shrug off a bolter's impact quite so easily.

It swung a huge chainaxe at him. He took a step back, and the axe went wide. Its head was so heavy that the ork's swing threw it off balance for a moment. Ghazan raised his staff high. The eye sockets of the horse skull on its end glowed with the fury of Chogoris, and the winds of the White Scars home world rushed out from his being. They knocked the ork off the gunship, then raged to the ground below, hurling the attackers back.

Ghazan reached into the spirit of the moon itself. He touched its elemental strength. He spoke to it with the voice of Chogoris entwined with his own. *Cast these vermin away*, he said. *Scour them from your surface*.

The winds shrieked with anger. They flattened the orks and bowled them over, clearing the area around the two bikes by a dozen metres on all sides. Ghazan held the orks at bay. He pinned them to the ground with the moon's howl.

Frothing with rage, the biggest of the orks were already pushing themselves up. Then the Battlewagon's cannon thundered again, and this time it hit very

close to the flank of the *Furious Lightning*. The gunship shook hard. It broke Ghazan's concentration, and he lost his link to the moon and his home world.

Behind him, Ghazan heard Kaidu climb out of the cockpit, then pull Tokhta up. Ghazan turned. 'You have seconds to get clear,' he said. He took the jump pack Kaidu handed him.

Kaidu nodded. Tokhta said, 'My thanks, Stormseer.'

Supported by Kaidu, the pilot slid to the ground. He slumped over Ghazan's bike, but managed to start it unaided. Tokhta opened up with his bike's twin bolters, pushing the orks back again, giving Kaidu the seconds and space he needed to start the run. Then they rode off, smashing through the greenskins, crushing them beneath their wheels.

On the starboard side of the Thunderhawk, the tank was closing in. It had been slowed by the other White Scars, but they hadn't been able to cripple it. The ship was surrounded by orks racing with each other to claim the prize.

Ghazan had the jump pack on now. 'Pull back,' he voxed to the squad. 'I have this.'

He dropped into the cockpit. Despite the damage, the control surfaces were still more or less intact. He drove his fist into the panelling until he had punched a hole through, then peeled the metal back, exposing the wiring. He was no Techmarine, but he murmured a prayer of apology to the ship's mortally wounded machine-spirit. He asked it to accept what he was about to do, and act as he hoped it would.

The orks were on top of the nose now. Two were fighting with each other over which would have the privilege of entering the cockpit first. Ghazan shot them both. He grabbed the shattered windshield frame and hauled himself out. He looked down at the wiring, fixed its position in his mind, and triggered the jump pack. He shot into the air as the tank drew up beside the *Furious Lightning*. He kept looking downwards, visualising the cockpit, as he reached out once more to the elements.

He was a seer of storms. He would share his vision with the orks below.

The moon responded to him. The land was outraged by the presence of the greenskins. It was eager for retribution. It gave Ghazan its lightning. His staff crackled electrical silver along its entire length, and then the blast, a sear in the night, struck the cockpit of the Thunderhawk.

With a roar of final rage and triumph, the *Furious Lightning* embraced its namesake and found its vengeance. All its weapons systems fired at once. Its remaining Hellstrike missiles launched straight into the ground. Explosions grew

from explosions as the fuel and ammunition ignited. The gunship disappeared in an earth-shaking blast. The fire swallowed the tank, and then it too added to the holocaust. The fireball rose to meet Ghazan, and the jump pack barely kept him from the hunger of the spreading destruction. Successive booms built on each other. They were a symphony of ending. They were the sound of the entire centre of the ork army gone in a second, incinerated at the moment of their celebration.

On the descending arc of his jump, Ghazan saw the lights of the two bikes streaking away from the fire, still cutting their way through the greenskins. As he landed just beyond the periphery of the blasts, he saw the last tank come apart in flames too, brought down by Temur's bike squad.

Ghazan hit the ground with his bolt pistol drawn. He marched forwards, staff high, putting shells in the skulls of the nearest orks. A few fired back at him, but they were not attacking. The remaining force was in disarray, panicked by the massive, sudden losses of infantry and all their heavy support.

No other tanks appeared. The orks were retreating.

'We have a respite,' Temur said. 'I don't expect it to be long, and it was dearly bought. I have no intention of sacrificing our remaining Thunderhawk to gain us another breathing spell, and I dislike sieges. I dislike them intensely.'

The Fifth Brotherhood had regrouped in the bastion. The khan was speaking to his sergeants in the command block. Colonel Gregor Meixner of the Mordian Iron Guard was present, but standing to one side, remaining silent with good grace while Temur paced. Meixner struck Ghazan as an officer with a finely developed sense of the possible and the political. The 64th was a justifiably proud regiment, but Meixner knew that he and his men were present in this engagement in a supporting role. They would assist the White Scars as they could, but it was the Fifth Brotherhood that would stab the ork operations on this moon through the heart.

Ghazan was impressed by Meixner's good-natured calm as he listened to Temur. The Iron Guard on this day had wound up being little more than bait. As Ghazan turned over in his mind what must happen next, he realised that the men would continue in this role. They were the inviting target that would keep the main body of the ork army focused on this spot, distracted from protecting its own base.

He doubted that Temur would be as sanguine when the same happened to him. But that was what the scenario he was outlining would be.

‘Our choices are limited,’ Temur said. ‘We will not give up our foothold on this moon, and we cannot attack a target whose location is unknown to us.’ He grunted, as if the reality of his situation just now fully registered. His scars, in the pattern of the claw marks of a *berkul*, darkened as his frustration shaded towards anger. ‘We will have to hold this position until we know where to strike.’ He turned to Sergeant Kusala, who led the Scout squad. ‘Brother-sergeant,’ said the khan, ‘I believe it is clear what we need you and your men to do.’

Kusala nodded. ‘It is, my khan,’ he said. He had lived long enough that his hair, tied back following tradition in a horse’s tail, was grey. Though Ghazan was younger, his hair was white. It had been since the night of his first vision, when his fated role as zadyin arga had been made manifest. ‘We will find the greenskins’ manufactorum for you,’ Kusala went on.

‘Good. And when you do, we shall fall on it like the worst of gales.’ To Meixner, Temur said, ‘When that moment comes, we will move to destroy the manufactorum, regardless of the situation on the ground here. That may well mean abandoning you to face another siege like we saw today. Quite possibly a worse one.’

‘We will do our duty,’ Meixner said. ‘We will hold.’

Temur grunted again, this time more satisfied. ‘I look forward to your being put to the test, colonel. We cannot afford to let this mission drag on too long. Neither can the Raven Guard on Lepidus Prime.’ Temur stopped pacing. He had barely glanced at the tactorium table behind him. Not that it was proving useful. They all knew the lie of the land around the bastion. Northwards, where the target lay, was mostly conjecture. The difficulty was not in knowing the terrain of the moon. The problem lay in how the orks had transformed the surface since their arrival. None of the lithographs produced by orbiting augur arrays were helpful. The only way to find the site of the orks’ heavy armour production would be to find it on the ground.

All the same, Ghazan found himself looking past Temur at the table. The lithograph of the regions north of the bastion seemed to look back at him. The longer he stared at the image of the terrain, the more he felt the fraying vibration around the contours of reality that preceded his visions. Destiny tugged at him. The being he would fight awaited him there.

‘I will accompany the Scouts,’ he said.

Temur’s pacing stopped dead. He gave Ghazan a sharp look, but didn’t respond to him. He spoke instead to Kusala again. ‘When will you be ready to

leave?’

‘Within the hour, khan.’

‘Good. Make ready, then.’

Kusala saluted and left. To the rest of the sergeants, Temur said, ‘We will make what repairs we can to the bikes and Land Speeders. We will have constant, rotating patrols out there. We know the orks are coming back. I would have us hit them before they get so close again.’ He glanced at Meixner and visibly stopped short of issuing commands to the colonel.

If Meixner noticed the near slight, he didn’t show it. ‘We will be ready as well,’ he said.

‘Thank you, colonel.’ To the White Scars he said, ‘To war, then. For the Khan and the Emperor!’

The war cry was echoed, and the sergeants left the command room, as did Meixner. Temur made no move to go. He stood beside the tactarium table, as still as he had been restless a few minutes before. Ghazan remained where he was. The two of them waited until they were alone.

‘You are needed here, zadyin arga,’ Temur said. ‘On the front lines.’

‘Perhaps. But this is where I cannot be. I am fated to be elsewhere.’

Temur’s scars darkened again. ‘You saw what we were up against. Your presence tonight was the difference between our provisional triumph and disaster.’

‘That is not a certainty.’

‘The certainty is that our losses would have been much greater.’

Ghazan inclined his head once, conceding the point. He said nothing.

Temur began to pace again. As he did, he tapped a finger against the surface of the table. He struck it with the rigid *tak, tak, tak* of a march. ‘You arrived on my ship without any notice, at the last moment before the commencement of the mission,’ he said.

Again, Ghazan bowed his head. What the khan said was true. Ghazan saw no need to expand on that truth.

Temur moved to the far side of the table. The tapping continued. He seemed to be expecting more of an answer. When he received none, he said, ‘I received you with, I believe, the respect due to your office.’

‘That is so.’

‘Yet you will not do me the courtesy of telling me *why* you are here.’

‘I do not intend to be cryptic, khan. The full contours of my fate here are hidden to me. I have come to do battle with a powerful enemy. That is the full

truth.'

'And you don't know who or what or where this enemy is?'

'No.' Ghazan gestured at the tacterium table. 'But my sense is that it waits for me in the north.'

'Has it not occurred to you that this enemy might be drawn to the battlefield here? I have a great respect for the visions of Stormseers, Ghazan, but are they not open to different interpretations? You just admitted that the details are hidden from you.'

Though his soul already knew the answer to the khan's question, Ghazan did not dismiss it. He considered it long enough to confirm his certainty that he was choosing the right path. 'No,' he said. 'This foe will not come to me.'

'Then let the Scouts do their work, and in the meantime, fight where you are needed.'

'I am needed in the north. With the Scouts.'

'You are wrong. Your destiny may be pulling you there, but that is not where you should be at this time.'

Ghazan was silent for a moment. 'I am sorry to disappoint you, Temur Khan. But fate is not subject to pragmatism. I have no choice.' He said the last sentence as if to speak it were to cast aside all doubt. He brought his arms to his chest in the sign of the aquila and left before Temur could answer.

He did pause in the corridor outside the command centre. He understood Temur's growing anger. His actions would appear, from the outside, to be selfish and quite possibly foolish. He removed his left gauntlet and held his staff with his bare hand. He felt the ridges of the protective sigils. He closed his eyes and opened himself up to the warp.

The tug was there immediately. The chains of destiny were pulling at him with even more insistence. At their end, the figure of the foe awaited. The shape was no clearer than it had been before. But what it radiated had come into focus: triumph, bestial delight, destructive hunger. And power. Power that somehow was not entirely inherent to the foe itself. Power that was being fed, and was growing. Power that Ghazan must extinguish or die trying.

The Stormseer opened his eyes. Temur was right to think that the White Scars had little time before the war became entirely a defensive one and was lost. But the key was in the north. That was where time was slipping away. Time for the White Scars, time for Lepidus. Time for many systems beyond.



CHAPTER TWO

They left at dawn, heading north from the bastion, travelling at close to top speed for several hours. Ghazan was on his bike. In the Land Speeder Storm were Kusala and the four Scouts: Tegusal, Ariq, Bokegan and Yekejin. Day on the moon was a smear. Visibility was poor, thanks to a perpetual ground fog that was knee-height over much of the land, but rose as high as three metres in patches.

The ork army, though, was easy to spot. Ghazan and Kusala slowed their vehicles when they saw the greenskin horde appear over the horizon. They veered east, giving the orks a wide berth. The land had more pronounced rolls in that direction, and they were able, as they drove over the hilltops, to observe the size of the greenskin force and vox a report back to Temur. The numbers were greater yet, but there were no tanks. There were no vehicles of any kind.

‘I wish those were glad tidings,’ the khan told them.

Ghazan agreed. In the initial stages of the first assault, there had been no sign of tanks. And then suddenly they had been there.

‘Well, they’re not hauling them down the road with them,’ Kusala observed. ‘That much we know now.’

The greenskin army stretched for kilometres. Its clamour reached further yet. The moon’s day was filled with the yells and laughter and crude songs of the beasts. The cacophony of the voices was backed by the beat of thousands of trudging feet and the clanking of weapons and armour. It sickened Ghazan to think that he was looking at another nomadic army. That there should be any parallel between the orks and the culture of Chogoris was obscene. But the distorted, monstrous suggestion of the familiar was before him. It underscored the need to exterminate these xenos.

But his fight was not with that army. Not with those orks. Not now.

Half an hour after they left the marching horde behind, bike and speeder climbed a ridge, then stopped. Before them was a wide plain that had been transformed by the orks' presence.

'I do not like to credit the greenskins with genius,' Sergeant Kusala muttered over the vox. 'But the bastards can make our life hell without even trying.'

The plain had been turned into a refuse dump covering hundreds of hectares. Broken and half-finished vehicles and tonnes of scrap metal covered the area. The fog eddied over and between the detritus, concealing and revealing jagged edges, senseless assemblages, and endless, endless waste. Scattered irregularly were much larger piles of cast-offs, some of them the size of low hills. Smoke rose from fissures between the debris, and from exhaust pipes poking out like toxic weeds. There was a deep, arrhythmic beat that Ghazan could feel coming up from the ground. It was strong enough that he could see the contours of his bike vibrate slightly in time. Now and then, flame would belch up from the plain. There was no consistency, though. Ghazan didn't see the burn-off emerge from the same spot twice.

'How did they do this so quickly?' Tegusal wondered. 'Or have they been here longer than we thought? Is this deliberate?'

'Does it matter?' Bokegan asked. 'It exists. Now we have to deal with it.'

'Brother Tegusal's questions are relevant,' Ghazan said. 'If the orks have been here longer than we thought, that means they hid. Successfully. That means they planned. There is already considerable evidence for this. They established their heavy armour facility on an uninhabited moon, giving them plenty of opportunity to build up their arsenal unmolested before they attacked Lepidus Prime. Do those actions sound like the familiar tactics of orks?'

Tegusal began, 'On Armageddon—'

Kusala cut him off. 'We are not fighting that enemy. There cannot be two orks in the galaxy like that.'

'Still,' Ghazan said. 'This is unusual. And in close combat, these orks seem... more resilient.'

'Stormseer,' Kusala said, 'do you have any good news to bring to the table? Or is the galaxy already doomed?'

Ghazan smiled. He gestured at the view before them. 'Well, brother-sergeant, there can be little doubt that the greenskins are producing their vehicles *somewhere* here.'

'Mm,' said Kusala. The grunted syllable might have been amusement, or it

might have been displeasure. With the sergeant, it was often both.

‘They’re building the tanks underground,’ Ariq said.

‘Yes,’ said Kusala, ‘but where? Everywhere?’ A gout of flame appeared at the base of the descent to the plain. It vanished. A moment later, another appeared a hundred metres further in. ‘No industry should work like this.’

‘Nothing about the greenskins should work the way it does,’ Ghazan said. ‘It is pointless, perhaps even dangerous, to try to reason it out. We must accept that it is so, and deal with its reality.’

‘All very true, Stormseer,’ Kusala answered, ‘and all very well. That doesn’t help us, though. We cannot be sure of destroying everything beneath the surface without deploying cyclonic torpedoes.’

‘We are here to reclaim the system, not destroy it,’ Ghazan said.

‘Exactly.’

‘Where do we begin to look?’ Ariq asked.

‘Near the bigger piles?’ Tegusal suggested.

Kusala thought for a moment, then nodded. ‘There has to be some way in. Those are as likely spots as any.’

Ghazan agreed. The tug of fate was stronger yet. The battle was waiting for him underground. He was not close enough yet, in time or in space, to know more precisely where to find the enemy.

There were no orks visible on the surface. Kusala decided to favour mobility over stealth, so they kept to the vehicles and rode down onto the plain. They started with the nearest hill of debris, about two hundred metres to the north-east of their position. They circled it twice. There was no entrance. Nor did they see any means by which the discarded metal had arrived here in the first place. They moved on to the next hill, with no better luck.

As they reached the third, not far from the centre of the plain, there was a shrieking grind of gears. It came from beneath the surface, a few metres away from the north face of the heap. The hill began to shake. Slag tumbled down the slope. The lower portion of the mound heaved, and a trap door rose on hydraulic lifts. A maw the size of a Thunderhawk troop compartment gaped. The interior was a throat descending beneath the surface of the plain. From within came the screech of metal against metal.

Ghazan and Kusala steered bike and Storm around the curve of the hill and killed the engines. They kept the weapons pointed towards the entrance.

‘Did they spot us?’ Yekejin asked.

‘We’ll know in a moment,’ Kusala answered. ‘Do not fire without my order.’

They watched a treaded vehicle crawl out from the interior. It was loaded down with scrap. It was followed by another, then a third.

They were driven by grots. The diminutive greenskins had become permanent parts of the machines: the creatures' legs had been amputated, and their torsos emerged from the centre of the guidance mechanisms. The ends of their arms had been fused with the gears and steering wheels. They were almost servitors, except servitors did not howl and complain about their fate.

The grots did. Their litany of injustice continued without pause as they drove up the hill. The box of each truck tipped to the side. The dumped loads ran down the hill, creating a small avalanche of metal. The vehicles then backed up. They disappeared once more into the maw. Filthy smoke billowed out as the door lowered itself shut again. Debris continued to tumble down the side of the heap, covering the door once more with accidental camouflage.

'Well,' said Tegusal. 'I suppose that's one way in.'

'It might be a way directly into one of their infernal machines,' Kusala said. 'It is clearly not used by the warrior greenskins. Better to find how they get in and out.' He pointed to the door. 'Note this location, though. We may yet have to use it.'

'The other debris hills are likely more of the same,' said Ghazan.

The sergeant nodded. 'Then we proceed on foot.' He looked around. 'This is close enough to pass for the centre. We'll start here.'

Twenty metres away, there was a pile of discarded vehicle parts. With the addition of a camo-net, the bike and the Storm blended in with that confusion of metal. The Space Marines began a search that moved out in a spiral from the hill.

The hunt felt like drudge work. The orks had forced them into a humiliating slog through industrial offal. There were no options. The entrances to the complex, if that was what it was beneath their feet, could be doors or something as simple and lazy as holes in the ground. They would be hard to spot. Maybe the orks were hiding them, but it could also be that the greenskins simply weren't bothering to mark them.

'Here,' Ariq called. He had found a chute. There was a rough ladder leading down into the depths.

'Right,' said Kusala. 'Let's see what sort of damage we can do.' He started down the rungs.

Ghazan waited as the other Scouts followed the sergeant. He frowned at the opening. He would have expected to feel something if he was moving closer to

his fated appointment. Something as simple as rising heartbeats, or an intensified anticipation. He did not. Somehow, this route was not getting him closer to where he needed to be. He saw no better possibility for the moment, though, so he descended after the Scouts.

The chute ended in a passage that appeared to have been blasted out as quickly as possible. Its width varied every ten metres or so, making it more like a series of linked caves than a tunnel. The floor was littered with bits of assembly.

The Scouts used beam-lamps to illuminate the passage, though empty fixtures on the walls suggested there had once been lighting here. The tunnel led to a larger cavern where there were even more bits of incomplete war machines. They looked like they had been on their way to being eccentric variations of tanks, and had been abandoned because they did not work, or their creators grew bored. On the far side of the derelict workshop was another tunnel, from which came the noise of machinery. Ghazan looked down the short passage. The clanking grew louder. After a few minutes, he saw a grot-driven trash hauler arrive. It paused a moment, as if waiting to receive an addition to its load, then moved on.

‘This doesn’t connect to anything except their disposal system,’ he said.

Kusala joined him at the passageway. ‘Then it seems we are fated to take that route.’

Ghazan winced at the sergeant’s use of *fated*. It was wrong. *No*, he thought, *not this way*. ‘That will not serve,’ he said.

Kusala turned to face him. ‘Why not? Clearly, construction is going on at the other end of that line.’

Ghazan shook his head. The tug of destiny was suddenly strong, and it was pulling him away from this path. ‘That may be so, but it is not what we seek.’

Kusala answered slowly, choosing his words with care. ‘The khan gave us,’ he gestured to his Scouts, ‘the mission of pinpointing, and if possible sabotaging, the greenskin manufactorum. Do you know something, Stormseer, to suggest this route will not take us to our target?’

Now Ghazan was cautious as he answered. Though he outranked Kusala, he did not want to put him in the position of having to choose between two contradictory sets of orders. But there was no question of taking this path. In this, he did not believe he was being selfish. If the struggle he faced was so formidable that it sent ripples from the future to the present, then it would have an importance that went beyond the personal. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If we go this way, we will not reach our goal.’

Kusala paused a long while. His face was concealed behind his helmet, but Ghazan could guess the doubts written on it. He could see them in the expressions of the Scouts as they waited for a decision. Finally, Kusala said, 'Are you aware of an alternative?'

'I am not.'

'Then—'

'Not yet. Give me a few minutes, brother-sergeant. Will you do that?'

'Of course, zadyin arga.' The respect due to Ghazan's position permitted no other response.

'Thank you.' Ghazan wasn't sure if Kusala was aware of the friction between himself and the khan. But he wanted the sergeant to know that he did not take his cooperation for granted. 'This is necessary,' he added.

Kusala nodded, non-committal. He stayed where he was.

Ghazan left the others and retraced their steps to the chute, and climbed back to the surface. He stood in the centre of the orks' landscape of waste and turned around slowly. He stopped looking for a logical point of entry. There would be none, not in the normal sense of *logical*, not with the greenskins. The chambers below were proof of that. How many other semi-discrete workshops would they find if they kept looking? Some might be occupied, some not. Kusala was right that following the disposal line would bring them to an active facility. But if the manufactorum was spread out in bits and pieces, in haphazard fashion, underneath the full expanse of this plain, the White Scars could be searching for days and find nothing of any strategic value. There were great questions here. Not just where the tank-construction facilities were, but how the tanks were arriving at the battlefield. If the vehicles were being built here, how were they leaving? Shouldn't there be a steady stream of them emerging from the ground at some point?

No, the answers were stranger, and deeper. They had to be. Surely that was why he had been called here. The being he must fight was tied to those answers.

He kept turning, letting the details of the plain blur into an impressionist continuum of debris. He opened himself to the warp, feeling the currents of the possible and the inevitable. He could not read the future, but he could feel its undertow, and he could sense the gathering density of the potential seeking to become the enacted. He reached out to the land. He spoke to its spirit. Its suffering must be great, wounded and abused as it was by the orks. *We have come to free you of them*, he told it. He sought the worst injury, the nexus of greatest harm.

The answer came in the form of an instinct. He stopped turning. He found that he was staring at a spot about a hundred metres away, further to the north-west. There was no landmark that he could see. He kept his eyes fixed on the location as he began to walk towards it. 'Sergeant Kusala,' he voxed. 'I think I may have found something.'

He became more certain as he drew closer. There was nothing to confirm his instinct. There was only that growing certitude. It was enough. It fed on itself. He realised his lips had pulled back into a grim smile.

He stopped. There was still nothing to see, but this was the spot. He began tossing scrap metal aside as the Scouts joined him. He looked up at Kusala. 'Right here,' he said. 'Our path begins here.'

Kusala was motionless for a moment. 'Stormseer,' he said, 'there is nothing but more waste here.'

'No. There is something. We have to dig a bit further. That is all.' The sergeant's tone had been flat, respectful, but his doubts were growing stronger. Ghazan was sorry for it, but not insulted.

Kusala and his squad helped with the dig. The scrap was deeper here. They kept going down, and had not reached the ground yet. Ghazan realised this was a declivity in the plain, smoothed out by the volume of rubbish. This, he thought, was camouflage. This entrance was too perfectly hidden. Here was more worrying evidence of something greater than cunning on the part of these orks.

The earth shook. There was a single, hard jerk. It almost knocked the White Scars off their feet. More debris slid down the heaps. The air was filled by the sound of thousands of torn sheets of metal scraping against each other. The shockwave was visible, the shadow of a ripple, as it travelled beneath the plain. Then the earth stilled. Metal settled with a rusty chorus.

'What was that?' said Tegusal.

'The reason we are here,' Ghazan answered. He reached down, grabbed a sheet of metal that looked as if it had been intended as a door, and hurled it away. Beneath it, a hatch, three metres across, was set into the rock of the plain. There was no visible way to open it. But there it was: the true door concealed by a false, discarded one.

Kusala examined the hatch. 'Only to be used from the inside,' he said.

Then the vox sprang to life. Their khan was calling. The reprieve was over.

No, Ghazan thought. Even before he heard Temur's demand, he knew that he would refuse it.

At the head of the Fifth Brotherhood, the engine of his bike snarling its hunger for xenos blood, Temur Khan rode out from the bastion to meet the orks. The White Scars had had ample warning this time. The greenskin foot-soldiers were hours away when the report had come in from Kusala. Temur had the position of the orks, and the time and the distance to savage them utterly.

The entire mounted Brotherhood was part of the attack: the six bike squads and the five Land Speeders. The assault squad was carried by the surviving Thunderhawk, the *Khajog's Stand*. What raced towards the orks was nothing as mundane as a mere opposing force. It was war and wind combined. The sudden change on the battlefield, the flash of fortune's reversal, the decapitating blow of surprise: all of these things were embodied in the charge of the White Scars. The tribes of Chogoris had followed a tradition of combat for millennia. The technology had changed. The philosophy had not. The enemy was shattered not by overwhelming numbers or impregnable armour. It was speed, and the terrifying momentum that came with it, that routed the foe. It was lightning, not thunder, that was lethal.

Even so, the Fifth Brotherhood came with thunder. They eschewed the Land Raiders and Rhinos that were the mainstay of other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, so the deep growls of the heavy vehicles were absent. But the snarl of Land Speeders and bikes in such numbers was monstrous. The air itself turned feral. The White Scars were a storm flying over the land, and it would flatten everything in its path.

The wind rushed at the green tide. It came to break the waves, to turn them back. It would blow so hard that it would show that a tide could be stopped after all.

Temur Khan did not believe in comforting illusions. He knew, when he saw the ork mob stretching out for kilometres, that he was here to perform a miracle. So be it. He knew what he and his battle-brothers could do. He closed the distance with the orks, the landscape a streak in his peripheral vision, and he laughed.

'Behold the greenskin numbers!' he called out over the vox's company channel. 'Do they imagine that will make any difference to us? All they have done, brothers, is ensure that each of us may quench his thirst for xenos blood this day. Destroy them! For the Khan and the Emperor!'

The orks started shooting as soon as they saw the Space Marines. For the first few seconds, the range was too great. Then the gunfire became something to take seriously. The orks were not marksmen, but they didn't need accuracy when

they had volume. The calibre of most of the bullets could do little against power armour, but the vehicles were vulnerable.

Speed was the answer here, too. The orks couldn't get a fix on targets moving that fast.

Temur kept the Thunderhawk's heavy arsenal in reserve for now. The White Scars struck as a series of spearheads. Temur's bike squad hit first, killing the orks at a distance with bolter fire, and then driving hard into the centre of the lines and moving forward to cut the march in half. As the orks' resistance stiffened, the squad broke to the left and right, slicing through the greenskin flanks and out. Next came the Land Speeders, plunging the knife deeper into the enemy's heart. And when they veered off, the next wave of bikes followed on. By then, Temur and his squad were harassing the periphery of the horde as they looped back for another run.

The White Scars attack was a perpetual shock. The orks reeled. They were hit in the centre and on the sides simultaneously, and they were unable to get a fix on one group of Space Marines before it had moved on and another was renewing the charge. The bastion's plateau was barely visible over the horizon. The orks' advance ground to a halt, and bit by bit the White Scars crushed them to pulp.

When it came, Temur didn't see or hear the disaster. It happened on ground hidden by the gentle swell of the landscape. From the perspective of the battlefield, nothing had changed for the bastion. Temur wasn't even looking in that direction. He was focused on the next group of greenskins about to go down under his wheels and be shredded by his guns. The White Scars were tearing the enemy apart, moving so fast that the orks had yet to claim a single kill, unless it was their own kin as they fired indiscriminately in all directions.

The Fifth Brotherhood had absolute control over the battlefield, and yet Temur knew that it had all gone wrong. Something had changed. Perhaps the corner of his eye caught the flash of energy discharge in the distance, back towards the base, as he began his turn once again to drive through the orks' disintegrating front lines. Perhaps it was something as simple as premonition. But his heart was already sinking when Colonel Meixner was suddenly on the vox.

'Multiple heavy armour units inbound from the north,' he said. 'Six of them. They'll be at the foot of the plateau in minutes.'

From the north? Temur wanted to roar at the impossibility. How could the tanks have bypassed them? Yet they had, and now his entire force was hours away from the bastion that was in immediate danger. The army of thousands of

orks, the army that he was shattering, now looked like a decoy.

The idea that he might have been outmanoeuvred by orks was an obscenity that robbed Temur of words. It took him several more moments of outraged killing before he was able to answer Meixner. 'Hold fast, colonel,' he said.

'We plan to,' Meixner answered, clipped and assured, and fooling neither of them about the odds against six of the orks' war machines.

Temur turned sharply, cutting his advance short. The rest of the squad followed behind as he cut his way back out of the howling mob of xenos beasts. 'Brothers,' he voxed, 'we have been deceived. The bastion is in need of our aid. We must fly to the true battle.'

The orks were deciding where and how he fought. For that outrage, he vowed to coat the surface of the moon with their blood.

Then he opened a channel to the Scout squad.

Ariq was rigging a demolition charge on the hatch when Temur's voice came through on the company vox-channel. 'Have you found the manufactorum?' the khan asked.

'We have found another potential entrance to it,' Kusala answered.

'Six tanks are closing with the bastion. The greenskins' ability to field heavy armour must be neutralised.'

'Agreed,' Ghazan put in.

'Brother-sergeant,' Temur said, and the slight aimed at Ghazan was clear, 'how close are you to accomplishing the mission?'

'I don't know, my khan,' Kusala said. 'The lead is promising, but not definitive.'

'Very well. Carry on. You are more useful to us there. Understand that it may fall to you and your Scouts alone to destroy the facility.'

'Then that is what we shall do.'

'Good.' Still on the company channel, Temur said, 'Stormseer Ghazan, you must return to base. I hope your aid will not be too late in coming.'

Ghazan switched to a private frequency. 'I can best help the struggle here, Temur Khan.'

'If the entrance has been found, the Scouts can do their work. Your work belongs here.'

'I have no choice in this matter,' Ghazan said. 'And neither do you.' He terminated the link. He looked back at Kusala. The sergeant had removed his helmet after leaving the abandoned ork workshop. He wasn't even trying to hide

his doubts now.

‘None of us has a choice now,’ Ghazan said, as much to convince himself as Kusala. ‘What is coming is destined. Now open this hatch.’



CHAPTER THREE

Speeding south, away from the orks, Temur bit his tongue hard, preferring to draw his own blood than vent his rage pointlessly at the static that had replaced Ghazan's voice. He focused the energy of anger into greater velocity for his bike. He willed the terrain to flow faster. He opened a channel to Meixner. He got through, and he heard what he thought was the colonel's voice, but the man was drowned out by the sound of explosions.

The White Scars raced for the bastion. They flew over the land. They were a blinding streak of war. The ork force had vanished in the distance behind them. It seemed to Temur, though, that the greenskins' laughter followed them across the terrain. His ritual scars burned. His blood was up with fury, and with humiliation. He would tear the sky in half before he saw his company defeated by ork strategy. He still had difficulty in believing that there even was such a thing.

Geography was his enemy now, too. He needed to be at the siege of the bastion *now*. But no matter how hard he pushed his bike, he could not compress the distance to nothing. The Thunderhawk was faster than the Land Speeders and bikes, and he ordered pilot Naku to take the *Khajog's Stand* and its assault squad on ahead.

The gunship couldn't cross that distance instantly, either. By the time it reached the battlefield, and Naku began appraising Temur of the situation, the orks had had far too much time to wreak their havoc.

'Is the bastion still standing?' Temur asked.

'It is.'

'The walls are holding against the bombardment?'

'Not exactly,' Naku said. 'The Iron Guard has managed to draw the greenskins

away from the walls for the moment.'

'How?'

'By mounting a charge.'

The implications of that tactic sank in. Infantry charging heavy armour. Temur could imagine nothing other than a massacre. 'What is the status of the colonel's men?'

'They are still fighting.'

No elaboration was needed. Temur gave the Mordians a mental salute. He understood what they were doing. Their assault would distract the orks, who would seek to destroy the humans before them and save the bastion for later. He also understood the irony that loomed: the bastion might be standing after all the forces it was meant to shelter were dead.

Faster.

The terrain a vibrating blur beneath his wheels.

Faster.

The wind against his armour going from whistle to howl to shriek, its transfiguration of fury taking it from the voice of the moon to the voice of Chogoris.

Faster. And there, there, the bastion in sight, veiled by black smoke. On the plain before it, heroic but outmatched men fighting visions of giant, mechanised violence.

The voice of Chogoris calling him to battle, calling him to be wind himself, to be the gale, to be the violence of speed.

He rode with a thousand generations of tribesmen at his back. The wind was their voice, too. In his mind's eye, the spirits raised the curved blades of their tulwars high. As he topped the final rise before the plain of battle, the ancient cavalry flowed with him.

Temur Khan took to the field with a momentum to shatter worlds. At his sides, and following, was the scythe of the Fifth Brotherhood. And if an infantry force had been before him, the battle would have been over. Human or xenos, a hundred or ten thousand, no such enemy could withstand the shock of that charge. But no such enemy was here. This enemy had taken the form of metal monsters. And they were laying waste to a different infantry.

What the Mordian Iron Guard had achieved was worthy of monuments. The mortals had three Chimeras at their disposal, and had hurled them against the ork armour, as they had their own fragile bodies. The Chimeras were outnumbered and outgunned. Their armour was not in the same league as that of the ork

machines. One of them was already a smoking wreck, identifiable only by the sheer amount of blackened, twisted metal. The other two were damaged but still fighting. They had destroyed one of the ork tanks. And the foot-soldiers of the Iron Guard were still charging, again and again. The sun shone, resplendent, on their uniforms of blue and red and gold. They were pride and they were discipline. More than that: they were heroism, rushing to fight what could not be fought.

Worthy of monuments. Rewarded with a mass grave. Two of the Battlewagons moved around the field on random trajectories, pouncing on whatever large clusters of Mordians were closest at any moment. Gigantic, articulated claws were mounted on their hulls. They reached down into the mass of soldiers and pulled them up by the score, crushing them, spraying the ground with blood. The attacks were savage. With the claws, the orks had found a way to exaggerate even the violence of war. The machines appeared to revel in the sadism, to drink in the vitae that they squeezed from their prey as if downing casks of *chinyua*. At the same time, the main guns fired into the more distant formations, shattering charges, hurling body parts high into the air. The Iron Guard had diverted the orks from the goal of the bastion, and had given them the gift of enormous slaughter. The orks had accepted the gift with glee.

As he descended the slope, Temur saw a Battlewagon ram the side of one of the Chimeras. The front of the ork machine looked like a fist with teeth. The Chimera's gun fired one last time. The shell might as well have been wet sand. The Battlewagon was untouched. It collapsed the flank of the APC as if it were vellum. Flame and smoke poured out of the wound. The tank rode up over the Chimera, crushing it down.

The Mordian vehicle exploded. The blast was muffled beneath the weight of the Battlewagon. Fire enveloped the tank, an embrace and surrender. The Battlewagon drove out of the flames. The huge, jagged metal cluster at its front looked like a snarl of triumph.

The remaining Chimera was limping, slowed by its injury. Its moments were numbered. Its crew pushed it towards another of the Battlewagons. The main gun fired, and fired again. Its heavy stubbers sent an unending stream of bullets at the target. Its opponent had two cannons on staggered levels above the hull. They were short, primitive, and with a bore twice that of the Chimera's weapon. Their fire was a syncopated double-beat, the sound of a monstrous heart.

The accuracy of the Iron Guard was impeccable. Every shot hit. The orks missed, and missed again. Yet the outcome of the duel was preordained. The

men were doomed. Their ordnance did little more than render the forward armour of the Battlewagon even more grotesque. The ork shells kicked up huge fountains of earth where they hit. Only one strike would be needed to kill the Chimera.

The *Khajog's Stand* criss-crossed the field, striking at the tanks. Naku was being more conservative than Tokhta had been. The White Scars could not afford to lose both Thunderhawks. Nor could Naku fire with as much freedom. He did not have a plain filled with greenskins below him. His targets were larger and fewer. The gunship's heavy bolters and lascannons harried the Battlewagons, scoring telling hits against the weaker top and side armour. The Thunderhawk cannon had killed one of the other tanks. Its corpse was a gutted shell on the eastern edge of the battle. The assault squad had deployed, and was vectoring in on the tank closing with the Chimera.

'For the Khan!' Temur voxed to the company.

'For the Emperor!' his warriors answered.

And though he felt the truth of the battle cry to the depths of his soul, he also thought, *For me*. He owed the orks a debt of humiliation.

He led the charge towards the nearest Battlewagon. The tank turned to meet the bikes. Its claw reached out with delighted hunger.

In the great plain of debris, Ghazan watched Ariq detonate the charge on the hatch. The blast was muffled by the earth. The hatch blew in, its broken halves tumbling into the shaft it had concealed. It was wider than the one near the scrap heap, and had three sets of rungs. Ghazan and the squad descended quickly. Kusala waited to go down in parallel with Ghazan.

'Zadyin arga,' he whispered, 'are you sure that this is—'

Ghazan cut him off. 'My level of certainty is irrelevant. I am not deciding on the best tactic, brother-sergeant. I would not think of contradicting the khan in such matters. I am accepting what is destined. And neither he, nor you, nor I have the right to question fate.'

'As you say.' Kusala still sounded uneasy.

At the bottom of the shaft was a wide passageway, much larger than at the first location. The insulting ork versions of lumen globes illuminated its length. It stretched a long way to the left and right before it curved, and there were many branching corridors. There were signs here, too, of quick, crude blasting, but part of the tunnel was a natural formation. The orks were making use of a pre-existing cave system.

The walls vibrated with the beat of endless industry. The heart of the manufactorum was not far.

Tegusal was looking to the left, his head cocked, listening. 'This way,' he said. 'The heaviest sound is coming from this direction.'

Kusala concurred. 'Forward, then. That will guide us to what we must destroy.'

Ghazan took a step to follow. He stopped, rooted to the spot. He tried to walk. His legs refused to move. Tegusal and Kusala were right. Logic dictated they take this route.

Fate, inexorable and mysterious, called him the other way.

'No,' he said.

Kusala turned, eyebrows raised. He said, 'How can there be any question about our path?'

'There isn't.' He turned and started walking to the right. His body unlocked. His legs wanted to rush him to the appointed encounter. Since setting foot in the tunnel, he had felt the tug grow stronger yet. Time was a torrent, a cataract, and all the seconds were falling to the great clash at the bottom.

No choice, he thought. *None at all. There is no such thing.*

Kusala did not follow yet. 'What will we find that way?' he called.

'What we must fight if we want to win,' Ghazan said. He understood Kusala's reluctance. Without the impulse of his vision, he would see his own actions as those of a madman, or possibly something far more dishonourable. If they followed the other path, it was true that they must find the heart of the orks' tank production. But that wasn't enough. Ghazan knew, as surely as if the land had cried out its secrets to him as he had dropped below the surface of the moon, that he was following the only road that could lead to victory. The true threat lay elsewhere.

He paused and looked back at the Scouts. He was pushing them to go against all common sense, and possibly against the orders of their khan. He said, 'Brother-sergeant, the struggle that lies before me is destined, but it may not be for you as well. I will go on alone if necessary, and there will be no dishonour if you choose to part company with me here. But if you choose to walk this path with me, you will strike a greater blow against the enemy. I am certain of that.'

'The situation at the bastion is desperate,' Kusala said. 'We have to stop the tanks. Our failure would be catastrophic.'

'Then all the more reason why you should come with me.'

The Scouts looked back and forth between them. Ghazan regretted putting

them in a position where their loyalty to their sergeant was forced to contend with their spiritual awe of a zadyin arga. They were, to a man, keeping their faces neutral.

Kusala shook his head and walked forwards to join Ghazan. 'I do wish you could share your visions with me,' he said.

Ghazan smiled. 'You must rely on faith, brother-sergeant.'

'I am. Believe me, I am. And it is being tested.'

'It shall be rewarded.'

Kusala said nothing to that, but he gestured to the Scouts. They moved on, following Ghazan.

For the first few minutes, they seemed to be heading into another abandoned sector of the complex. The sounds of construction grew more distant, and they did not encounter any ork traffic. There were so many branches, though, that it would have been easy for considerable numbers of greenskins to be moving in parallel with them, with neither group being aware of the other's presence. After about fifty metres, the tunnel forked into three. Ghazan stopped in the centre of the intersection, listening for the pain of the moon and the imperative of fate. He chose the left-hand fork. A minute later, that tunnel split into four.

The White Scars moved deeper and deeper into the labyrinth. After the first branches, Ghazan let the Scouts take the lead. There were sounds ahead once more, and it was impossible to tell, in the web of caverns, how far ahead, and down which passageway, they were. The guttural ork voices bounced from wall to wall, mixed with the clang of hammers, the whine of tools, and the crackle of dispersing energy. Other noises too, less easily defined, but all suggestive of a great deal of activity.

'Why the different construction sites?' Kusala wondered. 'Not very practical. More planning and effort than I would expect from greenskins.'

'These orks are full of surprises,' said Ghazan. 'I think we will find that there is a reason.'

Step by step, branch by branch. One of the Scouts would take point, moving in silence and within the shadows. The next brother would follow half the length of the corridor behind, providing overwatch. The first would observe the intersection, and when he was sure it was clear, signal for the rest of the squad. Ghazan would point to the next branch to take, and the cycle repeated. The further into the maze they went, the more signs of occupation they encountered. Cables running along the floor, greater illumination, ruined bits of machine, and more and more of what passed for ork art: crude illustrations of their monster

gods, scrawls that were meant to be pictures of orks in battle, and the angular, jagged runes that were the greenskins' barbaric excuse for a language.

They reached another fork. Far more noise to the left. Ghazan felt the pull to the right. Kusala looked like he was about to say something, but held his peace.

Tegusal had point. Ariq was guarding the rear. The squad was halfway down the current section of tunnel when Ariq hissed a warning. They froze, waiting, weapons at the ready. A minute passed. No enemy appeared.

'What was it?' Kusala asked Ariq.

'A shadow moved,' said the Scout. 'I think we might be being followed.'

'Too stealthy for an ork.'

'My thought too, brother-sergeant. I did see something, though.'

Kusala doubled up the rear guard. They advanced even more cautiously. But at the next intersection, Bokegan also reported movement. Tegusal watched the auspex. Its screen showed a single blip, then nothing. 'Hard to tell if that was a legitimate contact,' he said.

'We will treat it as one,' Kusala told him. 'The day you ignore a possible threat is your last.' He turned to Ghazan. 'We are being shadowed.'

'Yes.' They needed to neutralise this enemy, force whoever was following them out into the open.

No opportunity arose at the next two junctions, but at the third, the route took the squad into a large cavern. It had been a big natural formation to start with, and the orks had expanded it further. The tunnel opened into it about two-thirds of the way towards its roof. A catwalk crossed the space to the other side. The cavern was filled with cables thick as tree trunks, pipes wide enough to ride a bike through. Steam and narrow jets of flame burst from cracks in roughly patched seams and joints. Arcs of blue lightning crackled along the lengths of the cables.

The conduits of energy and fuel arrived from dozens of different openings in the walls. The tangle achieved something resembling order towards the far end of the cavern, about five metres above the floor. There, the cables and pipes joined into two enormous, braided hybrids. One carried on straight out of the chamber. The other branched diagonally to the right.

Some thirty metres below, on the floor of the cavern, the orks laboured over roaring, sparking, grinding mechanisms. Ghazan guessed these machines had something to do with regulating the flow of energy and fuel. The cavern was some form of power plant.

The White Scars were going to have to cross in the open. The noise made by

the orks below would give them cover. The uproar of snarls and machinery was almost physical. A small war could be waged on the catwalk without drawing attention.

‘Auspex?’ Kusala asked Tegusal.

‘More readings, brother-sergeant. Brief, but definite.’

‘And the position of our trackers?’

‘To the rear.’

Ghazan and Kusala exchanged looks. The cavern was a few hundred metres wide. Kusala said, ‘If they don’t attack before we reach the other side, we’ll gain a significant lead. They might lose us.’

‘If they’re orks, they can just move faster,’ said Tegusal.

‘No,’ Kusala said. ‘If they were orks, they would already have attacked. This is something else.’

Ghazan looked at the other end of the catwalk. ‘This is the only path forward,’ he said.

Kusala grinned. ‘You’re proposing we blow up the bridge in our wake.’

‘Your mission involves sabotage, does it not?’

Kusala gestured at the cables. ‘We could do a lot of damage here. Perhaps cripple the manufactorum.’

‘No. That would draw too much attention. We still don’t know how the enemy is outmanoeuvring our forces on the battlefield. And the true threat is not mechanical.’

‘Knowing what the orks are attempting will serve little good if they have already done it.’

‘They haven’t. Not yet.’ Destiny would not allow it. For what purpose was he here, if his actions were meaningless? He did not believe such a perversity was possible. The war on the moon would hinge on the battle he must wage. ‘We are close to our goal,’ he said to Kusala.

‘Though we don’t know what it is.’

‘Have faith, brother-sergeant,’ he said again.

Kusala looked serious. ‘I do.’ There was a pointed ambiguity to the way he insisted on those two syllables. This time, he articulated his doubts. ‘But forgive me, zadyin arga, if I ask whether you place too much faith in your particular interpretation of your visions.’

‘I do not.’ Ghazan spoke with cold anger. ‘We’re wasting time. I suggest we destroy the catwalk behind us.’

Kusala nodded, and gave instructions to Ariq.

The White Scars moved out into the cavern. They kept strict watch on three directions at once: their destination, the cave floor, and their rear. Covered by Bokegan, Ariq set demolition charges at the entrance and midway point of the catwalk. The orks below didn't notice. Tegusal kept his eye on the auspex. Two-thirds of the way across, the Scout voxed, 'Multiple contacts! Closing fast.'

'Ready to detonate,' Kusala ordered.

The Space Marines raised their bolters.

Shadows made of speed and blood shot out of the gloom of the tunnel. Eldar. Ghazan recognised their red armour and white, serpentine runes. They were of that xenos sect that, like the White Scars, valued velocity on the battlefield. Clearly anticipating the destruction of the catwalk, a handful of the eldar warriors leapt off it and onto a pipe that ran parallel for most of its length.

Xenos and Space Marine weapons zeroed in on each other.

Ghazan saw his struggle teeter on the edge of ruin.



CHAPTER FOUR

The eldar did not fire. Only a few seconds had passed since their arrival. Those seconds were tantamount to the pause of an age. These xenos did not hesitate in battle. And now the seconds were passing, passing, passing.

The miracle, it occurred to Ghazan, was that his own brothers had not started shooting either. He grasped that miracle before it slipped away. ‘Hold fire,’ he hissed over the vox.

‘*What?*’ Kusala was outraged.

‘They haven’t attacked.’

‘What difference does—’

‘*Why* haven’t they?’

Kusala’s breathing over the vox was furious, but he repeated, ‘Hold fire.’

At the other end of the catwalk, another eldar emerged. This one carried a staff and wore robes. A halo of warp energy pulsed once around the figure. It was not an attack; just enough of a sign for Ghazan to recognise another psyker.

The eldar advanced slowly to the middle of the catwalk, then stopped. The other xenos warriors kept their weapons ready, but remained just as motionless. Four of them, male and female, carried rifles and swords. Three other female warriors had what looked like amplifiers built into the sides of their helmets.

The seconds passed. The din of ork industry continued, oblivious to the confrontation.

‘Cover me,’ Ghazan said, and he walked to meet the eldar witch. If Kusala had doubts about his judgement before, they would be even greater now. The eldar were a duplicitous, untrustworthy race. The wise course would, on most days, have been to ignore their stratagem and blow the catwalk. But on this day, Ghazan could not afford to regard the unfolding event as trivial. He could feel

the incidents of these hours being woven together. The anomalous and the serendipitous were aligning, forming a pattern that would be the revelation of his own war.

Still the eldar did not move. Ghazan stopped a few paces from the witch. He was close enough to strike a blow with his staff. Over the vox, Kusala said, ‘Ariq stands ready with the detonator.’

‘I would expect no less. Use it if you must. I trust your judgement, brother-sergeant.’ Ghazan faced the eldar, waiting. He gazed at the elongated helmet and its black eye slits. He could not see the features beneath. The helmet was its own face. Elegant, yet somehow insectoid. Hard. Alien.

The witch gave a shallow bow. ‘My name is Tellathia.’ The voice was female. ‘I would trace the skein where our forces parlay. Will you?’ Her Gothic was fluent, but its perfection was odd. There was no trace of accent. It was an incarnation of human language untouched by any human culture. It was a mimicry, a performance, flawless in technique, hollow at its core. There was no feeling for the words, as if the speaker floated far above them, gazing down with utter dispassion on something that was a tool and nothing more.

Ghazan’s mistrust flared so powerfully that he almost lashed out. His grip tightened on his staff. He leaned on it, pressing it down onto the catwalk as if grounding his hostility, dispersing it into the metal around them. ‘Will you give me reasons to negotiate?’ he said.

‘Our mutual destruction would serve the orks well. We have not come here to aid them.’

‘Why have you come here?’

Tellathia cocked her head to the left. ‘If I said that we are here to harm the orks, that would not satisfy you, would it?’

‘No.’

‘But would you tell me more of your goals?’

‘No,’ he admitted.

Now her head leaned to the right. ‘Then we understand each other that much. I believe that you and I, among our brethren, know each other somewhat better. You are called by something stronger than mere orders.’

Ghazan said nothing, but he did not contradict her.

‘This encounter is not a surprise to me,’ Tellathia went on. ‘Is it to you?’

‘It is of little importance to me,’ he said.

If the eldar was insulted, her body language gave no sign. There was only that gentle movement of the head back and forth, a graceful pendulum, between each

exchange. It seemed to Ghazan that she was looking at their dialogue as if it were a physical thing, a jewel she was examining for its facets and its flaws. Her sorcery was at work. He sealed himself away, using the shield of his psychic hood to counter any probes.

Wherever she looked, whatever she saw, it seemed to satisfy her. 'True enough,' she said. 'There is a larger shadow ahead, isn't there?' She didn't wait for a response. 'We should not pretend that our real goals are the same. We might agree that they are not incompatible.'

'How can we, when neither of us knows the other's goals?'

'Through reason.' She gestured towards the floor of the cave. 'Can you imagine us in league with the orks?'

'With difficulty.'

'Perhaps trust might be an element, too.'

'No.'

A wave of the hand, unconcerned. 'No? A sense of the breath of fate, then?'

Once again, he said nothing. He was sure he sensed a smile behind the helmet.

'An alliance of the moment, then?' she asked. 'We are agreed?'

He glanced at the warriors crouched on the catwalk and on the pipes. Tellathia's words were pleasant, almost playful. The stance of the other eldar remained frozen at the last moment before an explosion of violence. 'Do you speak for your kin?'

'I will speak *to* them. Will you do the same?'

He thought for a moment before answering. He made himself review the situation once more. There was much to be uneasy about. There was also little choice. 'Yes,' he said.

She bowed, more deeply this time. She held her staff at an angle, pointing away from her body, aiming it at the cavern ceiling.

Ghazan nodded. He walked towards the Scouts, turning his back to the eldar, showing that much trust. He spoke into his vox-bead. 'Stand down, brother-sergeant.'

'Why?'

'We have found common cause.'

'And you trust these xenos?'

'We should stand down. We should not be at ease.'

Kusala was reluctant. So, it seemed, were the eldar warriors. They did not lower their weapons at first. When Ghazan drew level with Kusala, he looked back. The eldar were carrying on their conversation by means as private as that

of the Space Marines. Tellathia's gestures were expressive, though. She seemed to be working as hard to convince her comrades of the wisdom of this course as she had with Ghazan.

She prevailed. The eldar lowered their weapons. So did the White Scars.

'Put the detonator away,' Kusala told Ariq as the crimson warriors descended to the catwalk. They came forwards, stopping a few paces away. Tellathia stood at the forefront of the squad.

'I will choose the path,' Ghazan said.

Tellathia nodded once. 'That is as it should be for you. When our routes diverge, then so be it.'

As Ghazan turned to go, he saw Tegusal gazing over the edge of the catwalk.

'What is it?' Kusala asked the Scout.

'There is a lot of space down there.'

Ghazan looked. Tegusal was right. The tangle of cables and pipes in the upper portion of the cavern had prevented him from noticing the fact earlier. All of the ork machines were concentrated in the centre of the chamber. Their periphery was very wide, clear, and level. 'Room for large vehicles,' he said.

'The entrances too,' Kusala pointed. Ghazan could just make out metal doors suitable for hangars at either end.

'Their heavy armour must pass through here,' Tegusal said.

'A road,' Kusala mused. 'Perhaps there are other, larger points of access to the surface than we've found so far.' He looked at Ghazan. He spoke quietly, though Ghazan was sure the eldar would hear what they wanted to hear. 'We must explore that possibility. Something wide enough to let vehicles out...'

'Would also let them in,' Ghazan finished. 'We will do as you suggest, brother-sergeant. In due course.' Kusala looked like he was about to protest. Before he could speak, Ghazan said, 'What we see here is important, but is not the whole truth of this facility. Isn't that more important still?' He was trying to meet Kusala on his own territory. The sergeant didn't know what to make of Ghazan's visions, so Ghazan spoke to him in terms of reconnaissance and intelligence. He didn't know if he had convinced the sergeant, but Kusala nodded, ready to move on.

The White Scars and the eldar crossed the rest of the catwalk. On the other side, the tunnels branched again. The widest passage sloped downwards, continuing forward. Ghazan chose it without hesitation. As soon as he saw the route it took, the sense of imminence became overwhelming. He was not far now. His opponent would soon emerge from the shadows of his visions and take

on flesh.

Even without the tug of fate, he would have known this was the right path. As it dropped and angled to the right before straightening out again, it was clearly moving into parallel with the great braid of cable and pipe that had headed out of the cavern in this direction.

The descent was a long one. Once the tunnel levelled off, Ghazan became aware of a faint vibration in the walls. He tasted the air. It was dry, ozone-filled, sparking with latent energy. He was walking through the incubation of an electrical storm.

‘Do you feel it?’ he asked Kusala.

‘Yes.’

‘You will be satisfied for having trusted me, brother-sergeant.’

Kusala grunted. ‘Perhaps so.’

The first of the intersections approached. Both Scouts and eldar went forwards, neither trusting the other to do the job properly. Bokegan and one of the crimson warriors advanced to the junction. When they looked right, they stopped for a moment, then ushered the others forwards. ‘I think this is our goal,’ said Bokegan.

Ghazan looked down the length of the short passage. It opened into another big space, this time at the level of the floor. His blood stirred. It burned. It was a form of exhilaration. He knew that he was looking at a *destination*, in the full meaning of the word. Revelation loomed. It took an effort of will not to charge into the cavern, roaring for his enemy. He held his war-thirst in check as both squads advanced.

What he saw beyond the opening made him pause. Shock hammered Space Marine and eldar alike. In the corner of his eye, Ghazan saw Tellathia stagger. The spectacle before them was a great fusion of horrors. Manifest atrocity and monstrous implication vied with mystery.

This was another space of complex machinery. Shouting orks rushed from one device to another. Energy crackled between gigantic electrodes. The jagged arcs were every colour of the spectrum, and some were no colour at all, wayward flashes drawn from the heart of the greenskins’ grotesque edifice.

Its living heart.

Beginning four metres off the ground, and rising to the ceiling, were rows of cylindrical cages. Like everything else, their construction was rough, a hurried welding together of sheet metal and bars, but they did their job well enough. Each was about a metre and a half in height, and a metre in diameter. Inside each

cramped space crouched an eldar.

The prisoners were emaciated and bruised. On the ones close enough for the details to be visible, Ghazan saw festering sores. Every one of the wretches wore a high metal collar embedded with crystals. The devices made Ghazan think of grotesque distortions of his psychic hood. Cables ran from the collars, connecting each to the next. More arcane energy flashed and sparked along their lengths.

Beneath his armour, Ghazan's flesh crawled, reacting to the dramatic rise in ambient psychic activity. The eldar prisoners were witches, every one of them. He was looking at an immense network of linked psykers. The fused pipes and cables from the previous cave arrived here, the cables plugging into the metal grid of the cages while the pipes split off to bring fuel to the machines at the base. On the far left, more cables twined away from the grid, passing through the cavern wall. The orks were using the eldar to power their project, though to what end, he could not guess. It made no sense that this was for any kind of manufacturing process. There was another purpose here, something that went beyond the construction of heavy armour.

'What is this?' Kusala whispered.

'This is a generator,' Ghazan said.

'It is an atrocity.' There was still no emotion in Tellathia's surface perfection of Gothic, but there was anger in the words, and horror in her stance. The same was true of all the eldar. They were so taut, the air around them seemed to thrum.

Ghazan's gaze dropped down from the ranks of tortured prisoners, back to the orks at work. Two of the greenskins stood out. One had so little flesh visible that it would have been easy to mistake the creature for part of the machinery. It was a large beast. Its arms were thick, its back broad. It was as tall as a man, but would have been taller yet if it hadn't been doubled over by the weight of the equipment it wore. A metal-and-leather harness held a power generator, half the size of the ork, on its back. Its forest of conical coils glowed violet. Light refracted oddly around the ork, as if the brute moved within a not-quite-invisible sphere. It wore complex headgear and what looked like mismatched goggles, the scope over one eye narrowing, the other widening. One of its arms was bionic. The prosthetic was misshapen, oversized. Its hand was a power claw, and instead of fingers, a cluster of tools, burners and shears extended from the end of the claw.

The ork walked back and forth before the entire length of the psyker network, supervising its operation. It beat underlings who weren't working the machinery

properly. It was constantly making adjustments, shoving its way forwards with a snarl to adjust dials and power levels. Its gestures were wide, sweeping, brusque. Ghazan saw none of the precision that was the hallmark of a Techmarine. Even so, the ork demonstrated great focus as it fine-tuned its creation – and the creation functioned. Greenskin technology was disturbing in its ability to perform brutal wonders when it looked as if it should simply explode at the throwing of the first switch.

This machine worked. The orks had harnessed the power of dozens of eldar witches. Ghazan looked again at the rows of prisoners, a multitude forced to sacrifice itself for another's will. The thought came that this was a monstrous parody of the Golden Throne. He hurled the idea away before it took root.

The overseer of the machines was accompanied on its rounds by another ork. When he saw this being, Ghazan thought, *At last*. Here was his enemy. Here was the threat he had come to this system to fight. And it was another parody, this time of his own station. The ork carried a staff. Its copper shaft was festooned with iron bells, and topped by a configuration of bones and a skull. The ork had adorned itself with totemic symbols. Ghazan was disgusted that he could recognise anything at all in its iconography. To think that there was any impulse in common between these creatures and the proud heritage of the White Scars was obscene. The destruction of the greenskins was all the more imperative. Their existence was a mockery, an offence to the eye of the Emperor. And this ork was a special insult.

It was also a special danger. Ghazan could see that at a glance. He had fought ork witches many times. They were explosive powers on the battlefield, dangerous, but closer to walking bombs than sentient foes. Their control over their abilities was limited. They were creatures of frenzy and storm. This one, though... Green energy spiralled in wisps from its fingers up and down the length of the staff. It glowed from the monster's eyes, and leaked from its ears and jaws. A brace of small greenskins dogged its footsteps. They danced, gibbered praise and pawed at their master's legs. The dispersing energy delighted them, but the witch ignored it and them. It walked with the tech and conversed with what passed for orkish calm. Their dialogue was barbaric, guttural snarls that sounded like fighting canines, yet their body language suggested a common cause rare in orks.

'This is their collaboration,' Ghazan whispered, the realisation startling the words from him. And still he could not imagine the purpose of the machine.

'It is what we have come for,' said Tellathia. 'To liberate our kin.'

‘In one way or another?’ Ghazan asked. He felt no trust for the eldar. He did feel some sympathy.

‘Yes.’

‘That witch...’ Kusala said.

‘It is the figure in my visions,’ Ghazan told him.

‘It displays unusual self-control.’

‘Agreed.’

‘How?’

Ghazan shook his head. ‘I don’t know how. These orks are different somehow. Harder to kill. They seem more... energised?’

‘Exactly.’

Ghazan turned Tellathia. ‘Can you explain this?’

‘I cannot.’ She hesitated before answering.

Ghazan watched the ork witch again. In the way it strode, in the grate of its laughter, it was a personification of the supercharged nature of the orks on this moon. Its tusked face and small, feral eyes gave it a look of animal stupidity. Yet it and its kind were waging a winning campaign against the forces of the Imperium, and somehow doing so thanks to having captured and enslaved dozens of eldar witches, each one of whom would have been mighty on the battlefield.

Do not underestimate this ork, he told himself. For the xenos to have shaped his visions so powerfully, it had to be a danger of the highest order.

‘A lot of space here, too,’ Tegusal whispered. Running to the right and left of the opening was another wide strip of level, empty ground, with the same vast hangar doors at either end.

‘I count a hundred orks,’ Ariq put in. ‘We can kill them in moments.’

‘Not those two,’ said Ghazan, pointing at the architects of the savage machine.

‘We’ll need to seal the entrances,’ Kusala began.

He was drowned out by the approach of a great roaring and clanking. The door to the left rose with the screech of uncoiled metal. The roar became deafening, the sound too huge for even as large a chamber as this cavern. The White Scars and eldar withdrew deeper into the shadow of the tunnel. A Battlewagon passed before them. A score of orks rode it, cheering in anticipation of bloodshed. It rumbled across the cave.

A hum built into a painful pressure around Ghazan’s skull. Beside him, Tellathia sank to her knees, clutching the sides of her helmet. In the cave, the ork activity around the controls of the psychic machine grew frenzied. The discharge

of energies became a lightning storm. The eldar prisoners contorted in their prisons, their mouths stretched wide in screams too painful to be voiced.

Ghazan heard the other door open. He risked edging forwards to see. He winced. The build-up of psychic energy was so great that it overwhelmed his hood's ability to cancel out the incoming force.

Beyond the door, in the next cavern, the floor was covered by a metal plate. It radiated energies in colours and pulses that mirrored those in the generator chamber, but with an even greater intensity. Towering coils surrounded its periphery. They were fed by the cables linked to the grid. The tank rumbled onto the centre of the plate and stopped. Its passenger orks hooted with delighted fury as the pulses became flashes, then a blinding sear. When Ghazan's vision cleared, he saw absence and revelation.

'Throne, no,' said Kusala.

The Battlewagon was gone.

'A teleporter,' Ghazan muttered.

The chamber rocked with the laughter of orks.

And another tank rolled by. Less than a minute later, it too had vanished.



CHAPTER FIVE

The first weapons of the White Scars' attack on the ork tanks were speed and presence. Those alone were enough to distract the crews from the less interesting targets of the Mordian Iron Guard. Their first pass, bolters blazing, did little damage. But it relieved the pressure on the mortal infantry. The Mordian units, shattered by the untrammelled slaughter, began to reform.

'You may pull back to the bastion,' Temur voxed Colonel Meixner after he had strafed one of the claw-bearing vehicles. He turned sharply and began another run at the Battlewagon.

'With respect, we will not,' Meixner replied. He sounded exhausted. 'We will fight at your side.'

'There is no need—'

'There is.'

Temur understood. Already, he saw order returning to the Mordians. Their anti-tank weaponry began to fire with greater focus. As he closed in for a second pass at his target, a rocket slammed into the Battlewagon's flank. The hit was a good one. The sides of ork tanks were never as heavily armoured as their fronts. The strike should have been enough to pierce the vehicle's hide and immolate its crew.

The tank kept coming. The construction of these Battlewagons was far more solid than Temur was used to seeing. It was as if the orks had been swept up in a ferocious enthusiasm for their creations, building armour upon armour, gun upon gun. The tanks reflected the bursting rage and strength of all the orks he had encountered on this moon. The greenskins in this system were overdeveloped. They were explosive with the energy of war.

'Draw their focus for me,' he ordered his squad. He stopped firing and veered

away from a direct approach, arcing around the tank while his brothers streaked towards it, drawing the ire of its crew. The bolters mounted on the bikes would be a distraction only. He would ensure that was enough.

Temur throttled up, speeding ahead of the rest of the squad members. As they hit the front of the tank with a storm of shells, he turned in to the rear, braked hard, leapt off the bike and climbed up the hull.

There were only a few orks riding on the outside of the Battlewagon. The rest had been stripped off by Imperial fire. The survivors ducked in and out from behind the fantastic, jagged protrusions that bedecked the hull. They raved and fired back at the White Scars, paying little attention to their own safety. Temur saw one take three bolter shells to the chest before he toppled to the ground. His corpse was crushed beneath the wheels of Standard-Bearer Kogegan.

‘I’m on,’ Temur voxed.

The squad stopped shooting at the hull. The bikes shot past, then came around again, close enough and aggressive enough to keep the orks’ attention without shooting Temur. He hauled himself up with his left hand. With his right, he pulled Windstrike from its scabbard. The power tulwar was a relic that dated to the Seventh Black Crusade. It had been in the possession of the khan of the Fifth Brotherhood for four thousand years.

Temur grabbed one more handhold and vaulted to the roof of the tank. There was an ork less than an arm’s reach away. It turned as he landed behind it. He thrust Windstrike forward. The balance of the tulwar was so perfect, its energy so attuned to its wielder, that it accelerated every movement. Temur’s blow punctured the greenskin’s metal collar and severed its spine. He whipped the blade free. There was no friction at all. It slid from the ork’s throat as if the brute were nothing but air.

The ork toppled to the ground, and Temur leaped to the next, who was riding just behind the hatch. It had seen him. It was a big specimen, massive even among these freakish greenskins. It swung its power claw at him, faster than he had been expecting. With no chance to evade, he grounded himself, sinking all the weight of his body and his armour through the tank, down to the moon’s core. Head down, he took the blow on his shoulders. Ceramite cracked. So did bones. The impact shook his frame.

He lunged down and forward, slashing up with Windstrike beneath the ork’s left arm, cutting through the tendons. The power claw became dead weight. The greenskin howled and tried to spin its body, as if it could turn the claw into a flail. Temur stabbed it through the bridge of its nose. Bone and gristle parted

before the powerblade. He hurled the corpse to the side.

Two other orks were scrambling to reach him from the front. The tank's hull had two levels, one with the gun, and the second, the upper one, with the claw and hatch. The greenskins had too much uneven ground on their own machine to cover. Temur pulled a krak grenade from his belt, triggered it, let it cook, then dropped it onto the hatch. He took one step back and shielded his eyes from the incandescent glare as the explosive melted through the tank's armour. The attacking orks staggered, blinded.

Temur leapt through the hatch while its sides still glowed with heat. He landed in a dark hell of grease, smoke, and roaring machinery. The cab was so cramped, he could barely turn around. The ork operating the claw had been killed by the krak. The gunner was climbing up from the lower level through another hatch. Temur sliced the top of its head off before the upper half of its body had emerged.

The driver came for him now. It fired a huge-bored pistol. The bullet ricocheted off the bulkhead to Temur's right and took off the ork's lower jaw. The monster shrieked its dismay and leapt at the khan. Temur stabbed Windstrike up through the driver's palate, skewering its brain.

He withdrew his blade from the slumping corpse. He was alone in the tank now, but it hadn't stopped. It hadn't even slowed. It rattled over the terrain at full speed, a mindless juggernaut. Temur took two more krak grenades and tossed them forward to the steering compartment. Then he climbed back out through the hatch.

He jumped off the Battlewagon just as the grenades went off. The tank's steering melted down. Its engine exploded. The front of the Battlewagon collapsed, ploughing itself into the ground with enough force to flip end over end.

It landed with a crash on its roof, and the impact touched off its ammunition. Then the fire reached its fuel tank and it blew itself apart. Temur saw the treads launched hundreds of metres across the battlefield.

Two down. Defence was turning to offence, with the Battlewagons under siege.

He ran back to his bike and mounted it. His squad reformed around him. He looked for their next target. Near the top of the rise, Sergeant Qaraqan's squad had driven another tank into retreat. Incredibly, it was still functional after being hit by the multi-melta manned by Esen, riding in Boralun's sidecar. But its claw was disabled, and the side gunners were dead.

As the driver pulled away, the Battlewagon's turret swivelled left, then jerked right. The movement was so unpredictable, it could have been mechanical failure. It must have been chance. Temur did not want to credit the orks' brute, instinctive genius of war.

Not that it mattered. What mattered was that the cannon fired and the shot went true. The shell hit Qaraqan directly. He and his bike vanished in the explosion.

The blast took out Boralun's bike as well. The destruction of the multi-melta was a second explosion, smaller, but orders of magnitude more intense. Two more Space Marines were erased from existence. Worse, whether through luck or heightened cunning, the orks had managed to take out all of the attack bikes. Only the Thunder-hawk still had effective anti-tank weaponry. And worse again: Ulagan and Batunai veered hard to avoid the carnage, and luck cursed the squad a second time. They were directly in the line of the gun when it fired again. An entire combat squad gone.

Raging, Temur charged the tank. The command squad came in at an angle, the bikes hitting the forward left flank. The turret swivelled away from the rest of Qaraqan's brothers. Temur led the run up, a hand's breadth away from the length of the vehicle. That took them to the top of the ridge. In the moment before he began his turn for another attack, Temur faced the land to the north, and he looked at just the right second. He saw the flash.

He saw the arrival of still another Battlewagon.

'The completion of our mission will also be yours,' Tellathia insisted. 'Once we free our seers, the teleporter will be disabled.'

The White Scars and the eldar had retreated a few metres back along the passageway, more securely out of sight of the orks, until they were ready to strike.

'That is insufficient,' Kusala said. 'That will not shut down this manufactorum. It will not bring us appreciably closer to purging this moon of the greenskins. And there are vehicular routes in this warren. The teleporter is unlikely to be the only route to the surface for these tanks.'

Tellathia made a hand gesture that was eloquent in its disinterest. 'Our paths are not entwined beyond this chamber. And if you think our present numbers are adequate to take on the thousands of orks in this facility, then I fear you are deluded.'

Kusala's face darkened. Ghazan spoke before the sergeant responded with

something more violent than words. ‘You are the ones deluded if you think the act of liberation will suffice.’

Tellathia’s head turned to him with a sharp jerk. She held it at an angle again, but instead of the hypnotic pendulum motion of earlier, there was an aggressive stillness. ‘Your meaning?’ Though the words were as empty of human intonation as ever, she spoke more slowly.

Anger, Ghazan realised. And quite quickly, too. Interesting. Perhaps important. The elegance and precision of these eldar did not make them immune to recognisable passions. But he was not looking for a weakness in combat in this moment. They all needed unity. ‘The larger shadow,’ he said. ‘It is here. You know this, I think.’

Silence from Tellathia. Her posture shifted slightly. She was more interested than hostile.

‘What would it take,’ he asked, ‘to capture so many of your kind? And to use them in this way?’

‘Much.’

‘The larger shadow can do this again, or worse, if it is not destroyed.’ He sensed her hesitation. ‘You saw that ork. You know there is something unusual at work here.’

‘More than unusual.’

Her phrasing struck him. He flashed back to what she had said before when he had asked if she could explain the anomalous nature of these orks: *I cannot*. He had the impression that she was genuinely unable to do so, and that the mere fact of her inability disturbed her.

‘That ork must be destroyed,’ he said.

‘Fighting it is your destiny.’

‘Not yours?’

For several seconds, she was motionless except for her fingers. They made slight movements in a complex pattern, as if she were playing some form of stringed instrument. Ghazan felt the deployment of psychic energies. There was a sharp spike, and Tellathia’s fingers stopped moving. Through the grille of her helmet came an intake of breath. Then she said, ‘No. The duel is yours alone. But it seems our necessary fate is to assist your journey to that point.’

One of the other eldar spoke quickly to Tellathia. She answered in a sharp tone. When she spoke her own tongue, Ghazan heard genuine emotion. Though he could understand nothing, he could hear a musicality that was meaningful, shaded with poetry, sorrow and anger, and so different from the soulless

precision of her Gothic. The exchange went back and forth a few times, and then the other eldar held up his hands in a gesture of acquiescence.

‘Your necessary fate,’ Ghazan repeated when Tellathia turned back to him.

‘I believe you understand me,’ she said. ‘There are choices where the correct decision is so imperative, there is no real choice at all.’

‘I do understand,’ he agreed.

She looked at Kusala. ‘You have carried the day,’ she told him. ‘You understand that our priority must be the rescue of the prisoners. We will provide what further assistance is within our power.’

Ghazan said, ‘The rescue can serve our purposes. What happens here will draw the greenskins’ attention.’ To Kusala he said, ‘You can follow the vehicular route away from the teleporter. That might lead to the manufactorum itself. Perhaps to the other exits.’

Kusala looked confused. ‘Don’t you mean *we*, Stormseer?’

‘My battle is here. But given what we now know, there is a clear, immediate need to shut down the rest of this facility.’

‘You are staying with—’

‘I am. It is true that there are choices that are not choices. I think your own path in this war has just become clear, brother-sergeant.’

‘Your decision is troubling,’ Kusala said. He eyed the eldar with clear suspicion.

‘It can barely be called a decision. It is what must happen.’ The struggle was rushing closer. Though he spoke calmly, he could almost feel his enemy’s blood splashing against his armour. The wind of the steppes was at his back. A culmination was near.

‘Very well,’ Kusala answered. ‘We will start in the previous large chamber. We will wait for you to engage the enemy.’

‘Thank you.’ He extended a hand. ‘For the Khan and the Emperor.’

They clasped forearms. ‘For the Khan and the Emperor,’ Kusala repeated. Then he headed off with the Scouts.

‘You fight alone with us,’ said Tellathia. ‘Your willingness to do so is unusual in your species.’

‘It is not a question of my willingness. It is the unfolding of what must be.’ Questions of possible betrayal and the unease inherent in any contact with the xenos had faded to background noise as the war of his visions came into being.

They moved forwards to face the consequences of forced choices.

No words passed between Ghazan and Tellathia as they launched the attack.

There was no formal coordination of strategy. Neither would accept any interference from the other in war doctrine. But there was also a measure of respect. They both drew on the warp. They both lived its dangers.

Ghazan had his purpose. Tellathia had hers. He would use the possibilities opened up by her squad's attack to further his end. He knew she would do the same. The orks would be caught in the synergy of their separate but enfiling purposes.

The eldar struck first. While the ork tech and witch were moving towards the far end of the chamber, the three female warriors rushed forwards. They unleashed a scream that transcended mere sound. Even from his position behind the blast, and protected by his hood, Ghazan felt the brush of the lethal shriek. Its razors scraped against his nervous system. The orks operating the grid were far less fortunate. The nearest ones went into seizures. The eldar sliced them apart with power swords that sang with light.

The other four warriors in Tellathia's squad opened up with weapons that resembled rifles, but fired a stream of what seemed to be discs. The air hummed with the sound of steel insect wings, and the rest of the orks at the machines staggered back. Some of them fell, lacerated to shreds, and did not rise.

In less than ten seconds, every ork in contact with the machinery had been struck. The part of Ghazan's consciousness that saw the full picture of the battle registered that the eldar had taken care not to damage the mechanism itself. They were hoping, no doubt, for the luxury of removing the prisoners without inflicting further trauma.

There was no room in Ghazan's war for hope. There was the speed of the strike, the hurricane of strife, and the rush of fate. Striding forwards, his focus zeroed in on the ork psyker. The beast was just turning, as was the engineer, the two of them startled by the sudden deaths of their underlings. Ghazan pointed his staff at the witch. He seized the ferocious psychic energy in the cavern, and through it called once more on the storms of Chogoris. Lightning flashed across the chamber. The crack of thunder shook the walls.

The lightning struck the witch, hurling it against the rear door. The electrical discharge washed over the tech, sparking and dissipating around the contours of an invisible sphere. The conical power coils on its back glowed and spat their own lightning as they fed energy to the force field. The ork snarled at Ghazan. It loped away from him, reached the far door, and punched a control panel in the wall to its side. The doors at either end of the cavern rose. Mobs of greenskins rushed in, raging at the intrusion, and celebrating the unexpected opportunity for

war.

The web of pipes and cables were an easy climb, even in power armour. The Scouts, more agile in their lighter carapace, made their way down faster than Kusala. He caught up with them a few metres up from the floor. They waited in the shadows, surrounded by the hiss of leaking steam, the sparking of random discharges. The focus of the orks below was entirely on the machines and their snarling disagreements over how to make them work best.

The ambient noise was such that Kusala couldn't hear when the war began in the next great chamber. He knew it had started, though, when the orks were overcome with what appeared to be spontaneous rage. They were rushing to the left, brandishing weapons, even before the door rattled open.

As the last few greenskins passed through to the unfolding battle, Kusala dropped to the ground. To the right, the vehicle path led through another opening and into a wide, high tunnel. He pointed at the tangled knots of conduits, valves and levers. The Scouts nodded and began rigging demolition charges.

Kusala moved to the tunnel entrance. There were plenty of smaller passages and caves intersecting with it. He heard the echoes of running orks bouncing down the tunnel's length, coming from around the left turn a hundred metres from the entrance. A large force was approaching, too big to take on. 'Get it done,' he voxed.

They did. With seconds, the squad joined him. He pointed to the nearest cave. It was little more than a concavity on the right of the main tunnel, but it would do. There was no rear exit, so no further orks arriving from behind. If the squad was spotted, then it would be a fight, but Kusala didn't think they would be. The orks would be too set on having their share of the main battle, too focused on what lay in front of them, to notice what watched at the side.

They moved quickly along the tunnel and into the side cavern, going as far back into it as they could. They formed two lines, bolters out, with the front row crouching before the others. Ariq held the detonator. He looked up at Kusala with a grin. 'We aren't going to forge an alliance with this lot, are we, brother-sergeant?'

'No. Take them out at my command, brother.'

The horde arrived. The orks waved guns and blades. A few of them fired into the air. The ceiling was high enough for the vehicles to pass, but no more. Bullets ricocheted. Some found marks on a return trajectory. Kusala saw an ork killed by his own ammunition. The greenskins around him burst into laughter as

he blew his head off.

The stream of troops was a large one, but it ended. As the last ork entered the machine chamber, Kusala said, 'Now.'

Ariq pushed the button. Multiple blasts took out the controls, and brought tonnes of conduit crashing down on the orks' heads. Screams of outraged pain filled the air. The collapse continued for several seconds, and by the end of it, the entrance was blocked by metal wreckage.

'Both ends of the chamber?' Kusala asked Ariq.

'Yes, brother-sergeant.' Still that grin. Ariq was partial to explosive deaths for the Emperor's enemies. 'The survivors are going nowhere.'

'Good. Then let us make good use of the time we have purchased.'

Kusala sent Tegusal up as forward watch. They moved down the corridor at high speed, pausing at the corner just long enough to see that the way was clear. As they followed the vehicle route, they heard the alarm spreading through the facility. The side corridors fed more sounds of confusion and riot as the orks converged on the two caverns. More appeared in the main tunnel, but the White Scars always had sufficient warning to get under cover. As with the other large passages in the complex, the tunnel was actually a series of linked caves. The natural formation must have served the orks' purposes well, requiring very little in the way of further mining to create the underground highway. Kusala wondered how far it extended.

He had his answer before long, though he heard it before he saw it. The clamour of construction filled the tunnel. Even with a fight under way, and what must have been a serious loss of power, the manufacture of the tanks was continuing without pause. The squad went around one more turn, to the right this time, and before them appeared the heart of ork industry in the Lepidus system.

The cavern was the largest one yet. Its ceiling was no higher than the power plant, but this chamber was at least twice as long and wide. There were half a dozen Battlewagons close to completion, and what appeared to be the same number in earlier stages of assembly. More conduits from the power plant fed into the cave and into a collection of giant batteries spread at intervals around the floor. These fuelled the orks' tools. The greenskins swarmed over scaffolding, slapping metal and guns and engines together. The activity was furious.

The squad closed in on the entrance. The tunnel split there, with a branch heading off to the right on a pronounced uphill slope.

'The road to the surface,' Tegusal said.

'Yes,' Kusala agreed.

Ariq was eyeing the assembly bay. Kusala could see his eagerness. There was great scope for destruction in that space. Had Ariq not been a White Scar, Kusala thought, he would have thrived as a battle-brother in a Devastator squad. 'We can finish the job right here,' Ariq said.

Kusala shook his head. 'Too many greenskins, too much materiel. We don't have the explosives or the strength. We can inconvenience them, though.' He turned to Tegusal. 'Find the exit. The rest of us will give these greenskins some misery.'

He switched his vox to the company channel. Time to summon the rest of the brotherhood.



CHAPTER SIX

‘Are you sure?’ Temur asked Kusala over the vox.

‘I am. The zadyin arga will destroy the teleporter. We have the rest of the ork heavy armour before us. We don’t have long. Several vehicles look battle-ready. Even if the teleporter is destroyed...’

‘They can still travel here,’ Temur finished.

A cannon shell landed a few metres in front of him. He swerved around it, then turned for another run at the newest tank. The two recent arrivals were sticking close to each other, less for mutual protection, more to use each other as bait for the foe. The main cannons were blasting apart the Mordians from a distance. The side guns were punching into the White Scars as they tried to cripple the vehicles.

The White Scars and the Iron Guard were fighting five tanks again. The main body of the ork infantry would not be long in arriving. And now Kusala was telling him that the number of Battlewagons could easily double. Perhaps in a few minutes. At best in a few hours.

His bike raced towards the tank. His bolters fired at the side gunners. In the space between seconds, Temur weighed his decision.

If he took the brotherhood at desperate speed to the manufactorum, they would be leaving the Iron Guard to a fate that was anything but uncertain. The mortals had courage, tenacity and skill. None of that mattered in the long run against the ork machines. By the time the White Scars returned, the bastion could well be a smoking ruin.

And if he stayed? By Kusala’s own estimation, the Scouts were not strong enough to cripple the ork facility. There would be delay, and there would be losses, but more ork tanks would arrive, and the end would be even more certain.

Closer to the tanks now. He made rapid corrections left and right. Ork bullets screamed overhead. A few struck the front armour of his bike. He kept to the course.

There was no real choice. To stay would result in the further consolidation of ork strength. The White Scars had come to find the manufactorum, destroy it, and from that blow, destroy the orks on this moon. The bastion was here for that purpose too. So it would have to play its role.

He wondered what the difference was between his forced hand and Ghazan's sense of fate.

Temur and his brothers shot past the left flank of the Battlewagon, strafing it with shells. They killed the side gunners and a handful of orks clinging to the roof of the tank. But the vehicles had arrived with the greenskins covering them like ticks, and the gunners were replaced in an instant.

Temur contacted Meixner. 'Colonel,' he said, 'the successful prosecution of this war will require sacrifice.'

'Ours?'

'Yes. The heart of the greenskins' operation here is about to be exposed to us. The *Khajog's Stand* and the assault squad will remain to assist.'

'You did warn me of this eventuality.' There was no bitterness, no irony in Meixner's voice. He understood. 'We will hold the orks here,' he said. 'We will keep their forces divided for as long as we can.'

'That will be sufficient. You have my word.'

'Thank you.' Then the disciplined formality of Meixner's tone slipped for a moment. 'If I might request a favour?'

'Of course.'

'Hurry back.' The irony came through now. It was as clear as the exhaustion.

When the demolition charges went off and the power plant collapsed on itself, the energy levels fluctuated wildly around the cages on the grid. One of the machines burst into flame. But the grid did not shut down. A minute part of Ghazan's consciousness wondered about this. Perhaps the hellish construction stored reserve power in batteries. Perhaps it was the imprisoned eldar witches themselves who were the source of the power, and the cables were bringing their energies to the plant in the next cavern rather than the other way around.

It didn't matter. The only thing that did was to tackle his future head-on, and the future was standing there, a thing of inhuman worship and feral magic.

Ghazan ran forwards. He sent another electrical blast ahead of him. It caught

the oncoming orks and the flash turned three of them to ash. Two others were rooted to the floor as the lightning devastated their nervous systems. But one of them, with smoke rising from its eyes, managed to keep running towards Ghazan, taking half a dozen more steps before it died.

So strong, he thought. Why are they so strong?

The witch was back on its feet. It opened its maw so wide that its head rocked back. It roared with an ecstasy of rage. The other orks were frenzied by the shout, and fed their heightened fury back to the witch. The ork madness was an almost physical wave. It knocked Ghazan back a step.

He fired his bolt pistol as he steadied himself. The orks seemed stronger yet, but their skulls still flew apart when struck by mass-reactive shells. A howling monster hurtled into him. He blocked the swing of the ork's chainaxe with his staff and shot the greenskin through the throat.

His outrage had its own power, and he moved forwards again. Staff upheld, he roared back at the orks, hurling the shout of ancestral cavalry charges. The shout became wind, and it flattened the greenskins, clearing his path to the witch.

Four of the eldar were climbing the grid, firing down from the cages at the orks. The others were engaging in melee combat with the greenskins, slicing at them with twin blades, forcing them back from the machines. Tellathia moved through the battle with a mix of stillness and uncanny speed. She carried no weapon except her staff. Her right hand moved as if she were conjuring music only she could hear. Wherever she pointed, there went shuriken fire or sword blow. Orks tried to kill her, but the attacks of her squad always hit the greenskins just as they were getting her in their sights or closing within striking distance. She kept the eldar ahead of the orks. Whatever attack the greenskins tried, the eldar countered even as it began. She seemed to know what the orks were going to do before they did themselves.

A few times, when her brethren were pressed hard, an ork slipped through the cordon of pre-emptive kills that surrounded her. The opportunity did the beast no good. Tellathia snapped into motion, rounding on her foe with serpent speed. Energy coursing the length of her staff, she pointed. She didn't touch the ork, but it collapsed, screaming, clutching its head. It stayed down, gibbering, and was trampled to death by others of its kind as they tried to grapple with this being who seemed to exist a few seconds ahead of everything else in the cavern.

The ork engineer was in between Ghazan and the witch. It regarded him with malevolent curiosity. Ghazan's bolter shells exploded against the force field. Ghazan refused to believe that the tech was intentionally providing cover for the

witch; but it had done so, buying seconds during which the wind-stunned greenskins made it to their feet again. The ork witch spread its arms wide. Coruscating energy flowed from its claws. The streams split into dozens of arcs that landed on the greenskins on both sides of Ghazan.

The brutes seemed to grow before his eyes. He dismissed the sight as an illusion. But the orks were bursting with renewed power. They came at him as an explosion of violence. He saw residual energy crackle on the ends of their tusks. They were maddened with rage, ecstatic with it. He was surrounded by a wall of green muscle.

It closed in. A few orks, in the lunacy of their rage, fired their guns, shooting through their own ranks. Shotguns blew open chests and severed arms. The wounded kept fighting. A brute that should have been dead paid no attention to the hole in its torso, and swung a huge cleaver at Ghazan. The blow was strong enough to shatter the blade as it bit into the ceramite of his power armour.

There was a sound like stuttering thunder. It came from a portable stubber. Sparks and smoke billowed from the barrel as it spat a stream of bullets. The weapon was a monster of noise and recoil. It had no accuracy. It didn't need any. The volley cut through ork flesh and pounded Ghazan. His armour protected him, but he sensed damage occurring. His movements became heavier as servomotors lost power.

Something huge hit him from behind. He stumbled forwards a step, turned his momentum into a pivot and faced his attacker. The ork was a head taller than the others. It wielded a grotesque double-bladed chain-cleaver. The weapon was ridiculous in its overwrought expression of bloodthirst, but it was wielded by a being that was equal to its violence. More blows rained on Ghazan from all sides as the big ork swung the roaring blades at his face.

If the strike went true, it would cut his head in half.

He had all the time he needed to see the danger, to understand it, and to parse his reaction. As he had entered the pivot, he had reacted on instinct. He tapped into a power as elemental to the collective psyche of the White Scars as lightning and wind were to the identity of Chogoris.

He summoned speed. It had been the defining feature of the White Scars way of war for all the millennia of the Chapter's existence. It had been the way of the steppes long before the arrival of Jaghatai Khan. War was speed, and he became its incarnation.

The ork's swing appeared to slow, as if it were happening in deep water. The fists and blades around Ghazan became lethargic. He ducked beneath the

chainblades and moved to the side of the ork. Beneath the greenskin's heavy brow, its stupid eyes began to widen in surprise. Ghazan brought his bolter up to the brute's temple. He pulled the trigger. The normal pace of time resumed as the ork's head exploded.

No more orks came from the entrance behind Ghazan. Ariq's sabotage had been effective. The great flood of the green horde had been slowed, but it had not been stopped. The enemy continued to arrive from smaller passages, mostly on the north side of the cave. More and more orks directed their fire at the eldar in the elevated positions, the greenskins showing no concern about preserving the lives of their prisoners.

The four warriors were forced to send their shuriken into the flesh of more and more targets. Even with Tellathia's direction, they could not hold them all at bay. The orks shut down the options of destiny through sheer numbers. There was no future where tragedy did not occur. First one, then a second of the warriors fell, sublime armour shattered by simple but overwhelming brutality.

There was art in war. To be Adeptus Astartes was to know this and to practise it. Ghazan recognised the alien brilliance in the eldar art. The orks had no art as he understood it. They were nothing but raw war. Their undisciplined, exuberant force smashed the art and trampled its remains.

The eldar on the ground tried to counter the new force. They unleashed their pulverising screams. The orks staggered, giving the last two eldar on the grid the chance to kill a few more. It wasn't enough. Tellathia's gestures grew more urgent. The eldar took down the orks faster, despite their own losses. But the tide was turning, and it was rising.

Wind, Ghazan thought. *Wind*, his spirit became. He reached deep into his soul, into the heart of Chogoris, and into the warp. He risked much, as the eternal claws of the immaterium reached into his self. He gained much, as the winds came, greater than before. They surrounded him, a cyclone spiralling out from his centre. The rage took the cavern. The orks lost their aim. The smaller ones fell. The eldar, warned by Tellathia of the coming of the gale, rode it out and slaughtered the enemy.

He'd won them all breathing space. Not much. A few seconds, perhaps.

Freed, for the moment, of the mob, Ghazan moved forwards again. Unmoved by the gale, as firmly grounded as a pillar, the ork tech hadn't moved. It was still blocking his path to the witch. It was still grinning. It was not attacking, but it had the look of feral joy of a greenskin in full combat.

Behind it, the witch was bent over. It clutched its staff with both hands,

trembling with the tension of effort. It was surrounded by a narrow, intense aurora. Power was barely contained by the ork's body, and was still building.

Ghazan realised that he'd been half right. The tech was not protecting the witch. But it was cooperating. The look on its face spoke the truth: it was attacking. The two were launching a coordinated strike, with the engineer giving the psyker the opportunity to prepare its great blow. Ghazan charged, still firing his bolter in the faint hope that he might overwhelm the tech's force field in time. He was drained from calling the great winds, but he began to open his mind to the warp yet again.

Stop, he thought. *Stop, stop, stop*. He'd been too slow. The orks had bought their own breathing space. They had delayed Ghazan just long enough.

Just a few metres away now. The tech's force field wouldn't matter. He wouldn't let it. He would smash the ork aside with his own momentum. Let him only have the time to take those last steps.

The tech jumped out of his way. It crouched low, racing to Ghazan's left for the nearest side exit.

The witch was standing straight.

The blow came.

There was no way into the cavern except through the main entrance. Yet there was still the chance to approach without being detected. The lumen orbs that the orks were using were harsh, bright, and threw stark shadows across the floor. The tanks were well-lit. Beyond them, the lower reaches of the cavern were a confusion of darkness and pulsing glare from giant welding torches. The noise of the construction was deafening. Kusala would have had to resort to hand signals just to make himself understood.

The Scouts moved in, flowing from shadow to shadow, wraiths in armour. The orks were consumed by the riot of industry. On all sides, Kusala saw the dark side of creation. The orks built with glee and wild passion. Everything they brought into being was grotesque. They gave form to excess, and the excess was brute violence. There was nothing sensible or practical about the designs of the Battlewagons. There was too much armament, too much shielding, too much metal piled on top of metal. And yet the vehicles were every bit as dangerous as the orks believed they were. Somehow, their form made them into the monsters they were meant to be.

Seeing them closer, outside the frenzy of vehicular combat, Kusala was struck by their size. They were larger than the typical ork Battlewagon. Everything

about these orks was exaggerated, as if some malign spirit were inspiring them to greater heights of destruction, war, and riot.

Kusala scanned for opportunities as they headed deeper into the cavern. He would have to choose the target well. There would be a single opportunity. If the damage was severe, with accompanying chaos, the Scouts might live long enough to do more. If it were minor, they would be useless martyrs.

Ariq signalled for his attention. He pointed. Two vehicles over, partially obscured by the intervening scaffolding, a completed Battlewagon was being fuelled. It was close to the centre of the cavern. Beside it was a reservoir twice the size of the tanks. Kusala nodded. He followed a path that took them under the scaffolding, shifting back and forth between patches of darkness, approaching the clear space.

Closer up, Kusala could see the spills of the orks' promethium. There were pools of it over much of the cavern floor in this area. More was streaming down the side of the Battlewagon, leaking from the hose, and dripping from the bottom of the reservoir. Ariq's eagerness was bordering on delight. No wonder. The orks might as well have issued him a written invitation to do his worst.

Kusala looked back the way they had come. The quickest retreat would take the Scouts past two more Battlewagons. As single-minded as the orks were about their tasks, they weren't so blind that they wouldn't notice a human coming right up to the vehicles. But given a much greater distraction...

Kusala began to share Ariq's eagerness. It was time to unleash what he and his Scouts did best. In this cavern, they would complete the mission that Temur Khan had given them. He could not deny the importance of what following the zadyin arga had revealed. But he could not shake the idea that, if they had not encountered the eldar, Ghazan would have insisted they continue down the path of his visions. They would likely never have found this assembly bay.

Kusala had a full measure of respect for Ghazan's prowess. He did not doubt the importance of the Stormseer's visions. He did not doubt their reality. What he doubted was Ghazan's insistence that what he had seen superseded everything else about the mission. There would be a reckoning with the khan later. Kusala had no interest in being caught in the middle of that crossfire. He was a warrior of the White Scars, and he asked no more than to do his duty to the *minghan* and Chapter, primarch and Emperor.

Now, though, Ghazan had removed himself from Kusala's concern. Now, there was only the purity of the mission. The purity of destroying the foe.

One of the lessons that Kusala taught the Scouts was the many shades of

speed. On foot or on Land Speeder, the spirit of the White Scars way of war was the same. Stealth *was* speed. The attack came without warning. The enemy did not see the blow coming. The effect was the same: lightning from a clear sky.

Kusala sent Ariq to prepare the lightning over the reservoir. He led the others back so that they might turn the first thunderclap into a great storm. At the first Battlewagon, he stopped. Yekejin and Bokegan continued to the last vehicle before the entrance. They moved well. Within very few paces, Kusala could barely see them, even knowing where to look.

An act of great speed was closing in on the orks.

He maglocked his bolter. He took out a krak grenade for each hand. He eyed the tank's wheels and its roof, covered in labouring orks.

Two orks began shouting at each other. They stood on the top of the Battlewagon, behind one of the viciously angled crenellations. Each wanted the same tool. It looked like a combination wrench and welder, as long as Kusala's arm. After a brief tug of war, one ork snatched it from the other's grasp. The second greenskin grabbed its brother by the throat and smashed its head against the point of the crenellation.

The iron punched through the ork's skull and launched its left eye in an impressive arc. The rest of the orks hooted. The corpse's grip relaxed. The tool fell, clattering and bouncing through the scaffolding. It landed in front of Kusala. He was close enough to pick it up.

He mentally framed a string of curses. They were his most imaginative in at least twenty years.

He glanced left. Still no Ariq. Looked up. The ork was clambering down the scaffolding.

Left. Was that a shadow moving? It was.

The ork was on the ground. It reached for the tool.

Ariq was seconds away.

The ork grasped the tool. It saw Kusala. Its jaw hung open in stupid surprise.

Still holding the grenades, Kusala slammed his gauntleted fist against the bridge of the ork's nose. He caved in the greenskin's face. The brute still roared before it had the good grace to die.

'Now!' Kusala shouted. He threw his grenades, one at the roof, one at the wheels.

Ariq triggered the charge.

The speed of war struck the orks.

The first blast of Ariq's explosives was dwarfed by the conflagration of the

promethium. The fireball filled the centre of the chamber. It swallowed the Battlewagon. It turned orks and scaffolding into flying, burning debris. Then the tank exploded. Its wreckage was of larger mass. It flew lower, hit the ground rolling, smashing down more construction works.

The flames were still spreading when first Kusala's grenades went off, then those hurled by Yekejin and Bokegan at the other Battlewagon. The kraks melted armour, wheels and axles. The vehicles slumped. They were far from killed, but their departure from the chamber was delayed.

The orks reacted with chaotic rage. There were explosions in three separate locations, flames and secondary blasts spreading through the cavern. The greenskins didn't know where to shoot, so they shot everywhere, at everything that moved. For those first crucial seconds, as the Scouts made their way back towards the cave entrance, the orks saw only each other. The instinct to retaliate was too strong. Ork fired on ork. Frenzy and ferocity spread ahead of the flames. What order there had been before the attack collapsed.

The squad was just reaching the entrance when there was a roar almost as loud as the explosions. Only it came from a living throat. Kusala turned. They had been spotted by the overseers of the construction zone. Two large orks in thick armour waded out of the fire. Between them, they carried what looked like a massive stubber. Kusala realised it was a gun intended to be used as a Battlewagon's side turret. One ork carried the barrel. The other held the stock and had its finger on the trigger.

'Move!' Kusala yelled. The Scouts already were.

The orks opened fire. The gun's recoil was great, and its barrel ran hot within seconds. Though the lead ork held on, the spray still went wild. Bullets the length of a mortal's hand ricocheted around the cavern.

The initial shots hit Bokegan full on. They stitched a trail of holes that ran the entire length of his torso and then his head. He jerked, immobilised by the severity of his wounds as the massive rounds took apart his carapace, blew out his throat, put out his eyes. The force of the blows propelled him forwards another step. Then he fell.

Ariq shot the lead ork in the head. It fell, dropping its end of the gun. The other ork howled as the gun kicked uncontrollably. It kept its finger on the trigger, spraying bullets across the entire breadth of the cavern until another round from Ariq dropped it too.

Now the other orks were breaking from their disorder. They realised that the true enemy had been found. More died as they were caught in the flames. The

fireball was dissipating, but it was still touching off spills and minor reservoirs. The orks ignored their losses. Kusala doubted that they even understood the meaning of the word. They ran forwards, single-minded in aggression, heedless of anything beyond the need to kill the enemy.

There were hundreds of the orks. Not all of them joined in the rush. They climbed onto the completed Battlewagons. Kusala's heart sank as he heard engines rumble to life, spewing clouds of blue smoke.

As the Scouts reached the entrance, so did a large contingent of orks coming from the downward slope of the tunnel. *Trapped*, Kusala thought. 'For the Emperor!' he shouted.

'For the Khan!' the squad answered.

Blades drawn, they threw themselves at impossible odds.

Then the ground shook while, further back in the tunnel, the sun rose.

The race was even worse this time. During the run to the base, Temur had been fighting to avert disaster. Now victory was the prize, and that hope was so slender, so delicately balanced on the horns of time, that it could vanish if the brotherhood was as little as a few seconds late in arriving.

So far, he thought. *Too far*.

He didn't want to know how long it had been since he'd received Kusala's message. But he was aware of precisely how many seconds it had been, and how many minutes it would be before they reached the site of the manufactorum. *Too long*.

There had been no further messages. He had tried contacting Ghazan, but to no avail there, either. Once more, they had seen the ork infantry in the distance, closing in on the bastion. They would be in the fray long before the White Scars reached their target. Temur didn't doubt the Iron Guard's tenacity or sense of duty. He did wonder if they had the troops. The battle would soon have very little to do with skill. The orks would have the numbers and strength to win it, and the question was only how long it would take them to smash the human defenders.

Riding past the orks, ignoring the distant sounds of their raucous laughter and songs, knowing the devastation they were bringing, was one of the hardest things Temur had done. Earlier, he had had the reasonable expectation of returning to the bastion before the slow orks and their armour arrived. Now there was no such hope. Now there was the need to strangle the ork operation at its source. Two bastions were being attacked. The first one to fall would lose the planet.

Temur's vox-bead crackled to life. It was Tegusal, one of Kusala's Scouts. 'We have secured an entrance, my khan,' Tegusal said.

'Good. Where is it?'

'Look right when you reach the manufactorum's vicinity. You'll know when you are there. It's unmistakable. We have the entrance open. We will send up a—'

Loud, continuous static on the vox. The thread of hope frayed. Temur responded with anger. He responded with speed. He vowed to tear every ork tank apart with his hands. And he called on Tegusal. He called on every White Scar in the ork manufactorum.

Nothing but white noise. Nothing but the idiot sound of disaster.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Ghazan had time to realise the ork witch was launching an attack. He had time to raise his own defences against it. There was even time for the eldar to redirect fire against the ork. Time to know that this greenskin must be prevented from striking this blow.

All that time. But no time to stop the attack.

Ghazan saw it all go wrong in precise, acid-etched detail. He saw the irony that Tellathia must have known what was coming, and though he heard her begin to cry ‘No!’ in Gothic, the crude medium of speech was too slow. He saw the ork aim its staff not at him, but at the grid of cages. He saw the muzzle of his bolt pistol come into line with the witch’s head. He felt his finger squeeze the trigger.

All too late. Far, far too late.

The energy discharge from the staff was enormous. The flash alone heated the air to the point that flesh on the nearest orks burned. What it caused when it hit the cages was of another order again.

The concentrated psychic strength of the eldar prisoners was released all at once. The power that had teleported tanks lost all coherence. The chamber vanished from Ghazan’s sight. The defence he had raised at the last second saved his identity from being ripped apart, its particulate echoes thrown to the warp. Even so, he was caught in an explosion that was the death scream of a hundred souls, and sheer, physical destruction. Blasts hit his mind and body at the same time. He held fast to his consciousness. His material self was hurled through the air. He couldn’t see where he flew. There was no up, no down, no direction.

Only the blind silver shriek.

The roar of flame.

The battering by stone and iron.

The blast that came through the tunnel was not a simple explosion. The light that engulfed Kusala's squad and the orks was not from the visible spectrum. It was not from the materium at all. Yet it blinded all the same. It struck like a spear to the brain. Kusala's very name started to slip from his grasp. He snatched at it, and at his oath of moment, and so it was as a sergeant of the White Scars that he shouted, 'Remember who you are! You are Adeptus Astartes. You are the sword of Chogoris! You are the sons of Jaghatai Khan!'

He didn't know if he was heard. The words were being spoken by someone a great distance away. Perhaps he spoke them only to himself. But they were the truth, and the truth was a potent weapon against the chaos that sought to devour them all. He could not see. He could not feel his limbs. But he knew they were there, and when he commanded his arm to swing, he was sure that it did. Even in the midst of a storm of disintegration, he attacked the enemy.

The wave receded, taking the pain with it. Kusala could see again. Another Scout, Yekejin, was down, perhaps felled by the psychic explosion, but now hacked apart by the orks' chainblades. Most of the greenskins who had been in the tunnel were also down. Some were dead. Others were writhing on the ground, clutching their heads. Their eyes had burst. Bloody foam was at their mouths. A few – the largest – still stood, and were fighting, but their movements were slow, their blows inaccurate. The orks in the cavern had been spared the worst of the blast, but they were stunned, sluggish.

With quick, vicious jabs of his tulwar, Kusala eviscerated the ork before him. He saw that Ariq was still dazed. He step-lunged forward, caught another ork in the chest. The brute rocked back but came at them again. Kusala shook Ariq's shoulder as he blocked another of the ork's blows. 'Scout!' he shouted. 'You are at war!' Ariq returned to the present moment and shot the ork. It took three shells to kill it.

Kusala and Ariq retreated up the slope. From inside the assembly bay came the sounds of pursuit as the orks recovered. The Battlewagons had stalled. Now they growled once more. The green horde and its machines of destruction were on the move.

'Do we stand and fight?' Ariq asked.

'Our duty is not martyrdom,' Kusala snapped. He led them upwards at a run. 'Our duty is to delay the orks long enough for the rest of the minghan to arrive.'

'Two of us?' Ariq sounded game, but sceptical.

'Three,' Kusala allowed himself a moment of grim humour. 'We will rejoin Tegusal. We will not defeat the greenskins. But we can slow them down.'

The slope went on for at least another thousand metres. Some of the turns were sharp, though the width was always enough to allow the passage of the tanks. The sides of the walls were scraped where the orks had barrelled through with more speed than care. Kusala saw daylight after the third twist. One more turn, and there was Tegusal. A few dozen ork corpses were stacked on either side of the exit to the surface. The door was a single steel slab ten metres long, held open by hydraulic arms.

From back in the tunnel came the clamour of the orks.

‘Any word from the khan?’ Kusala asked Tegusal.

‘He is coming, brother-sergeant. They all are.’

‘How long?’

‘I don’t know. The vox went out when we were hit by that...’ He hesitated, lacking an adequate word for the event.

‘A surge of some kind,’ Kusala said. ‘It doesn’t matter what it was. What is important is that the orks do not break out until our brothers reach us.’

‘We might be able to collapse the tunnel,’ Ariq offered. ‘We could seal them in.’

The sounds of riot were louder yet.

Kusala shook his head. ‘No time.’ He pointed at the arms. ‘Drop this door.’

Two krak grenades were enough to melt the supports at their base. The White Scars moved outside as the door slammed down with a reverberating boom.

‘This won’t hold them long,’ Ariq said. ‘They’ll burn or blast their way through.’

‘And we will be here when they do,’ Kusala said.

‘Brother-sergeant, I know I could have rigged the ceiling in time.’

‘Perhaps. And are you sure this is their only exit?’

‘No,’ Ariq admitted.

‘We have their heavy armour held at this spot. They won’t retreat before a simple shut door. You’re right. They will break it down.’

He turned to scan the horizon. In the distance, he could see a cloud of dust. The full strength of the Fifth Brotherhood was coming to punish the temerity of the greenskins. ‘When the orks open that door,’ he said, ‘they’ll be letting us in.’

The heat faded before the psychic glare did. Ghazan knew this only because the cavern was already cooling when he could think again. The ripples of the soul-death subsided. He was no longer being swamped by the doom of others.

The details of the material world returned in stages. First he realised that he

was no longer in motion. He was lying on his back. Then the darkness registered as being the actual absence of light. Next came the awareness of great weight. Last was the warmth of his blood on his face. The wounds on his forehead had already sealed.

He was buried. He pushed against the wreckage. Metal, a great deal of it, but not stone. He pushed harder. The weight shifted. It gave him hope that there had not been a cave-in. He worked both his hands up to chest level, then shoved outwards. His arms were great pistons, and the remains of the ork machines fell away from him.

Ghazan stood up, testing bones and armour. Vital systems still intact. The heaviness was worse, but he could compensate for it. His body was as unbroken as his mind.

He was the only thing unbroken in the cave. The machine had spread its death across the entire width of the chamber. The explosion had reduced it to melted slag and blackened, twisted bars. The corpses of its prisoners were contorted husks enmeshed in the metal. The only light in the cavern came from the blue flame burning at the mouths of broken conduits.

The orks were all dead. Their bodies were incinerated. Many had died from forces other than fire. Ghazan saw skull after skull that had split open, the grey matter inside bursting out like a violent cancer. No eldar was still standing, either. The elegance of their armour was destroyed. It was fragments and angles, as ruined as the bodies inside.

The door to the teleporter cave had been peeled back by the force of the blast. The space beyond was just as wrecked. The platform appeared to have exploded. Large chunks of metal shrapnel were scattered about the cavern. Ghazan saw several corpses that had been cut in half by the flying debris.

There was no sign of the ork psyker in either cavern. The engineer, too, had made its escape.

Ghazan clenched his fists. His frustration was mixed with the intimation of destiny that still tormented him. He had thought the moment of the battle had come in this chamber. Its delay was maddening. The full reckoning still waited.

He heard movement behind him. He turned. Where the grid's control mechanisms had been, the rubble shifted. Ghazan approached, bolt pistol at the ready.

The movement stopped. Ghazan pulled the wreckage away. Tellathia lay beneath it, broken but still breathing. Ghazan didn't think she would be for much longer.

‘The ork...’ she said. Her helmet’s amplifier still worked, giving her voice a volume at odds with the terminal pain.

‘Escaped,’ Ghazan said.

‘Yes.’ She spoke with resignation, not surprise. ‘You will find it.’

‘I know.’

‘When you do, please, finish what we came to do.’

Ghazan looked at the bodies in the wrecked cages. ‘It is finished,’ he said. ‘Your kin are no longer enslaved.’

‘No...’ A long pause, and an even longer one between her breaths. Each exhalation seemed to expel a bit more of her being. ‘Our great mission is as incomplete as yours.’

‘There are more prisoners?’

‘One more. The orks must not have him. Free Merentallas. Please.’ When Ghazan hesitated, she said, ‘It is what you are called to do. Just as we were called to die for your mission.’

He stared at her, wishing he could see behind the ornate but faceless helmet. ‘Called?’

‘By necessity.’

The implications of what she was saying sank in. ‘You knew you were going to die?’

‘It was...’ Pause. Rattling breath. ‘It was the only way to ensure your success. And through you, the ultimate fulfilment of our duty.’

‘You assume much.’

‘No. Nothing. You will see. Our fates this day are not our own. They are but steps in the culmination of another’s. There was never any choice.’ A very long breath, like a sigh down an endless tunnel.

‘My fate is dictated by that of the White Scars,’ Ghazan said.

There was no answer. He waited. She was still.

He knew the eldar had spoken the truth, at least as she understood it. He suspected that her perception of time’s unravelling was more acute than his own. Though being indebted to anything xenos was distasteful to him, he had incurred a debt of honour here. He looked down at the psyker. ‘I will free him,’ he said. Their missions were still braided.

Never any choice. Wasn’t that what he maintained? Then why did the words haunt him?

Outside the vehicle entrance to the complex, the vox-network started functioning

again. At the same time, the blows began on the other side of the door. Based on the sounds Kusala heard, the orks were beginning by hammering the metal with fists and weapons, as if sheer aggression would open the way for them.

‘We have a few minutes,’ Kusala told Temur. ‘No more.’

‘We are not far, brother-sergeant. Prime them for our greetings.’

The impacts on the other side became louder. Kusala guessed that grenades were being used. It wouldn’t be long before the orks thought to use the Battlewagons’ cannons. He stood to one side of the entrance, Ariq and Tegusal on the other, bolters ready. ‘The second a hole appears,’ he said, ‘open fire. Discourage their approach.’

He looked back at the dust cloud. It was growing larger. The khan was near.

The orks used their big guns sooner than he had thought. The first shot did not destroy the door, but shook it hard. Debris rolled down from the earthen rise in which the door was set. The next shell punched a hole the size of a man. Tegusal tossed a frag through it. The howls that greeted the explosion were gratifying. Then the cannon fired again. It kept firing, puncturing a new hole in the metres-thick metal each time. The door remained intact, and held down by its own weight, longer than Kusala could have hoped.

The shelling stopped. An engine revved. Something huge rumbled towards the door. The impact smashed the weakened metal apart, and the Battlewagon charged out into the daylight, the battering ram face wide with victory.

Kusala charged back inside the tunnel, Ariq and Tegusal at his heels. There was no fighting the Battlewagon on foot. If death was inevitable, it would come at a cost to the orks.

The greenskins were coming up the slope, a mob in fury. Behind them came another tank. It crushed the slower orks under its wheels. As yet it was not firing, though the passengers on its roof were. Bullets careened off the stone on all sides of Kusala. Rounds smacked into his armour. They didn’t slow him down. He roared back at the orks, and so did his Scouts. The three of them made their run at the orks as if there were hundreds of their battle-brothers at their sides.

Kusala threw his final two frag grenades ahead of him. They were joined a beat later by four more as Ariq and Tegusal followed suit. A minor artillery barrage hit the orks. The tunnel was almost wide enough for two Battlewagons to drive abreast, but it was still a confined space for such a concentrated burst of explosives. A score of orks died immediately. Their bodies were reduced to jagged bone shrapnel, impaling still more. The horde’s advance stumbled as the orks pushing from behind tripped over the bodies of the dead.

Barely a second behind the blasts, Kusala slammed into the orks. Tulwar in one hand, bolt pistol in the other, he slashed throats and burst skulls. The Scouts followed his model. They showed the orks that speed was not dependent on engines and wheels. Kusala's tulwar was more a blur than a blade. His prey did not see it until after he had severed their windpipes. When a brute tried to hit him with an axe or machete, the tulwar was already in defensive position, arresting the blow while the pistol came up and delivered a mass-reactive shell to the ork's snarling visage.

Kusala killed in spirals. He made it hard for the orks to anticipate his movements. He was never still. As one ork fell, he was already striking the next. The two Scouts showed they had absorbed every lesson of their training. They had nothing like the protection of his power armour. It was even more vital that they move quickly, and they did. Reduced to half strength, outnumbered by orders of magnitude, the squad cut the orks down. The Scouts were scythes from the steppes of Chogoris, reaping a harvest of death.

The orks were strong. They were not stunned long, and they were not passive before an enemy. If ever there was a species bred for the single purpose of war, Kusala knew, it was the orks. For each one he killed, three more were there, their hunger for battle undiminished. And they were strong. He was able to put them down quickly, but even these, the common infantry of the orks, were more resilient than they should be.

The Battlewagon continued to move forwards. It would have the Scouts under its wheels in the next few seconds. Behind it was yet another tank.

Tegusal went down. His legs were chopped from behind by a chainblade. He disappeared beneath the mob of stomping greenskins. The horde pressed tighter yet. Kusala's blade caught in the ribcage of an ork. He stopped moving for a moment, and he was almost borne to the ground. Whirring blades cut at the ceramite of his armour. He fired his pistol into the ork's body, knocking it back and freeing his blade. He swung wide, cutting throats and limbs. He was moving again, but he was more constricted.

The sound from the mouth of the tunnel changed. Kusala heard the first Battlewagon reversing back into the tunnel. There was another engine noise, too, higher-pitched and cleaner.

Bikes.

The minghan was here.

The manoeuvre was madness. The space was too restricted. His speed was too

great.

It was perfect.

The Battlewagon was in the tunnel entrance. On either side of it, there was enough room for the White Scars bikes and Land Speeders, with no margin for error. Strafing the tank would be like shooting a bullet into the barrel of another gun. Temur didn't slow. Bolters blazing, shells stripping the surprised orks from the roof of the Battlewagon, he plunged past the vehicle and into the tunnel. The walls echoed and amplified the snarl of the bike's engine. He heard the rest of the brotherhood following his example, shrieking past the tank to become a wall of speeding death descending on the orks.

He heard the concussion of the Battlewagon's cannon. It had fired inside the tunnel. Temur could not look to see the result, but he knew that, in these initial moments of the incursion, there was no way for the orks to miss. He had lost at least one more brother, and perhaps more.

The destruction he would wreak on the orks became that much more savage.

From the moment he entered the tunnel, only a handful of seconds separated him from the horde below. He saw Kusala and Ariq struggling in their midst. He saw the other tank closing in. He heard, beyond the curve, the approach of yet another. He processed all of this, and he reacted. This was war in his element: the rush of events too quick for a mortal to process, the need for reaction at the same instant as perception, the exhilaration of murderous velocity.

A tiny correction to the right brought the bike close to the wall. He could have touched it with his hand. Kusala's squad was struggling near the centre of the tunnel. Temur aimed his strike along the sides. The twin-linked bolters tore into the orks. A score died without knowing what had happened. Still without slowing, Temur ploughed into the mass of greenskins. He smashed bodies to pulp, ground bones to powder. He rode through the horde, and behind him came his brothers, and now it was the orks who were trapped in the tunnel, because death, sudden and unstoppable, was upon them. There was no space for the orks, and there was no time.

But there were still tanks.

Temur flashed past the Battlewagon before its crew could react. He kept going down the tunnel, spotted the next tank, and then another. He kept firing at the vehicles, picking off passengers but doing little other damage. Shells ricocheted off the monstrous forward shields. He had the crews' attention.

He whipped down the tunnel until he was sure there were no more tanks. Then he turned and raced back up the slope along the other wall. Now he could see the

minghan, the long line of bikes and speeders following in his wake, just as fast, just as deadly. They formed a conveyor belt of death. The assault on the orks was unending.

But the Battlewagons rolled on. Though they had lost their passengers and some of their crew, their armour was holding up against the bolter fire. And they were firing their cannons. As he shot past the tanks once more, the shells smashed into the walls, missing him by little. The explosions in the tunnel were devastating. Speed was the White Scars one defence. It wasn't enough. When the shells hit, it was by luck, not by skill, but in this space, with these numbers, the orks in the Battlewagons had the luck they needed.

The infantry was in tatters now. Kusala and Ariq had jumped onto the nearest tank, and were fighting their way in. Good. The brotherhood was close to causing critical disorder in the ork force. The Battlewagons were moving closer together. Any discipline the greenskins had was tenuous. Temur would see it severed.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ he voxed, ‘you know what has to happen.’

‘Depend upon it, Temur Khan.’

Constant fire. He was draining his ammunition stores. He and his brothers were also hitting the orks with a perpetual, disorienting hammering. Even if the shells were still being stopped by the armour, the omnidirectional clamour would have the orks lashing out on instinct. Their accident would come.

At the upward end of the slope, almost at the exit again, Temur saw the accident happen. It was the Battlewagon under attack by Kusala that made the error; the sergeant had seen to it. It struck the first tank with its cannon fire. Knowing only that they were being hit by a barrage, and now by a vehicle boarded by their enemy, the orks in the uphill Battlewagon responded in kind, turning their full armament on their brothers. The two tanks went to war.

The Battlewagons rushed together, driven now by the crews' hunger to tear out each other's throats. The next tank arrived. Its crew joined the fray, shelling the nearest target. Kusala's Battlewagon was now in the middle of crossfire. It wouldn't last long. Its crew fought back, though, and were still fighting when the fourth Battlewagon arrived. It came around the last bend, and the orks aboard showed no hesitation before launching into an attack, training their gun on the third tank.

Temur saw the masterpiece of confusion take form. ‘Keep them surrounded,’ he ordered. ‘Concentrate fire on the rear armour.’ It was thinner. It would give out.

The White Scars circled the Battlewagons. They were a noose of speed. The larger predators were locked in combat with one another, and the White Scars would ensure that there were no victors. The bolter shells hit the rear armour. The cannon fire hit the front. First one, then two of the ork crews realised their mistake and tried to disengage, but it was too late.

The Battlewagons died close together. The explosive immolation of the first wreaked havoc with the others, and still the battles raged. The tunnel became a maelstrom of fire and sound. If not for the White Scars discipline, and their skill in adapting to the lightning changes in the currents of battle, they would have been sucked into the vortex. The explosions reached a climax. For a few moments, the Battlewagons merged into a single being of iron and flame. Then, after being dwarfed by the blasts of fuel tanks and ammunition caches, the guns fell silent. The fires dimmed. What remained in the centre of the tunnel was a twisted mass of blackened metal.

Temur brought his bike to a halt near the wreckage. The battle had been a costly one. The ruins of seven more bikes and Land Speeders were scattered through the tunnel. There was little left of the warriors who had ridden them.

He found Kusala and the surviving Scout standing before the iron pyre. He pointed to a deep wound that ran from Ariq's right temple to the left side of his throat. 'You have fought hard to earn that scar,' he said.

Ariq bowed his head. 'Only my duty, Temur Khan,' he answered.

To Kusala, Temur said, 'Where do we stand?'

'We have accounted for all the completed heavy armour. There are still some partial ones in what appears to be the primary assembly bay.' He pointed back down the tunnel.

'Then the momentum is ours,' said Temur. 'We will erase what remains of the ork operations here and return to the bastion.' He grunted. 'If it is still standing. This war is far from over.' He paused before asking his next question. He already knew the answer would not please him. 'And Stormseer Ghazan?'

'He remained with the eldar.'

'The eldar?' He listened with rising anger while Kusala filled him in. 'What was the purpose of the imprisoning device?'

'It appeared to power the teleporter. There was something like an explosion when we lost the use of the vox. The nature of the explosion...' Kusala shook his head, as if still trying to clear it. 'The explosion was not entirely of the materium.'

'You think the Stormseer destroyed the teleporter?'

‘I believe so.’

‘No word since?’

‘None.’

Temur cursed. Ghazan’s silence could be chosen, or it could mean he was dead. The implications of the first possibility were, after what Kusala had told him, worse than the second. He did not doubt Ghazan’s loyalty. He did not doubt the reality of the zadyin arga’s visions. What concerned him was Ghazan’s judgement and sanity. ‘This changes nothing. We proceed as I have said.’

As he marched back to his bike, he called Ghazan on the vox. He had the sensation of sending his demands into a darkness of ruin, a darkness that was not empty.

Ghazan stood in the centre of the cavern. He was surrounded by the death of machines, the death of bodies, and the death of psychic energy. The emptiness of the space was gigantic. It had been a realm of excess. The life of machines, bodies and warp sorcery in violent collision had created a psychic atmosphere as dense as the core of a gas giant. Its sudden end created a profound tomb.

The great death of the eldar psykers was the barrier to his pursuit. The loss reverberated, a powerful null with the lingering scars of agony. But destiny did not end in this place. It still waited beyond the tomb. The time of its unfolding was closer than ever. If only he could reach through the grave-void, penetrate this bubble of psychic annihilation.

He knew that at least part of the barrier was self-created, a wall that had protected him from the deathstorm that the ork witch had unleashed.

He thought of Chogoris. He grounded himself in the strength of the home world. It shaped its warriors. It moulded them with lightning and wind, with the plains of battle and survival, with the immensity of its sky. It was the scourge of the weak, and the inspiration of the strong. As he felt his ghost walk with the spirits of Chogoris, he opened himself up to the warp.

He found a thin wound of certainty, a hairline crack in the nothing. He concentrated on it. It changed from crack, to thread, to rope. It wrapped around his consciousness. It pulled. There was a direction out of the dark and into further destruction. He grasped it as it held him. The possible became the inevitable once more.

He returned to a consciousness of the materium. The pull made him look to his right. He saw the shadow of a cave entrance behind where the control mechanisms had been. That was where the ork witch had gone.

Ghazan made his way over and entered the tunnel. It was a small one, barely high enough for him to walk without lowering his head. It narrowed at the floor. It felt like a seam in the bedrock. As he followed it, some sections became so constricted he had to pass sideways, the front and back of his armour scraping against the walls. This was not a passageway that would be of any use for construction. It was, he thought, a private route. If the ork psyker had this route for its own use, then either end must be a destination of some importance.

His vox-bead came to life. The sound of another voice was startling after the silence of the tomb. It was Temur. 'Stormseer, are you there?'

Ghazan did not respond at first. He knew how the exchange would unfold. He had nothing concrete to tell the khan about what he was doing. The full truth of his vision was still obscure to him. But he could not ignore Temur. 'I am here,' he said at last.

'Where is "here"?''

'Beyond the teleporter. I am in pursuit of the ork witch.'

'You think it still lives?'

'I am sure of it.'

There was a thoughtful pause. Temur was, at least, thinking about what that meant. Then he said, 'That greenskin is no longer our concern. We are concluding operations here. The manufactorum is destroyed, but we still have several heavy vehicles and the bulk of the ork infantry attacking the bastion. Our attention must be there.'

'So it would seem. May the winds propel you to the battlefield.'

'We go with you.'

Ghazan sighed. He began to detach himself from conversation. It was pointless. 'My purpose here has not yet been fulfilled.'

'You have done extraordinary work. Without your intervention, we would still be searching for this plant, and the orks would still be sending a stream of tanks our way. You have done your duty here. Now it calls you elsewhere.'

'Will you explain my visions to me?'

'Only my orders.'

'I regret, Temur Khan, that fate has decreed a different course for me.'

'Be reasonable! What threat is a single ork?'

'This ork? A considerable one. And we do not know that it is alone.'

'Zadyin arga,' Temur began again.

'I *am* sorry,' Ghazan interrupted. 'But this struggle is preordained.' He severed communications. *There is no choice.*

The tunnel's route was jagged. It took Ghazan even further beneath the surface of the moon. Before long, the silence gave way to the sounds of activity. As he drew closer to the source, Ghazan distinguished one ork voice snarling above the others. Commands were being issued. The witch, he guessed. He could also hear the sounds of industry.

Closer yet, though still in darkness. He felt the level of psychic energy building once more. It had to be more than just the witch's power. The strength was approaching what he had experienced in the presence of the cages.

Light appeared, the noise grew, and then the journey ended. Ghazan stopped in the shadows, a few paces back from a ledge a couple of metres above the ground. He looked into the cave before him, and saw just how wrong Temur was. The threat from the manufactorum had not ended.

Though they had lost the means to produce more tanks, the orks were on the cusp of victory.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The cavern was the largest yet, its ceiling cathedral-high. It was another teleporter room. It appeared to be powered by the same method as the first, and though the machinery was as large and complex as before, there was only one cage, one prisoner, the eldar that Tellathia had called Merentallas. The tunnels that arrived in the cavern at ground level were larger than the seam through which Ghazan had passed, but none of them could admit a vehicle. The thing that filled the space had been constructed here. It stood on the teleportation pad that took up most of the cavern floor.

Ghazan activated his vox-bead. ‘Temur Khan,’ he whispered, ‘the orks have a Stompa.’

He used the Gothic approximation of the greenskin name for the monstrosity. The syllables tasted unclean to Ghazan. No subject of the Emperor should ever have to speak a word that had no meaning outside of the human frame of reference. But the obscenity needed a designation, if only to rob it of at least some of its grotesque mystery. There was no proper word in the human tongue that could act as a name for the thing.

It stood well over twenty metres tall. It looked like all the detritus on the surface of the plateau had come together into a rusted mountain of an idol. Above a wide skirt of shielding rose a colossal approximation of a torso, arms and head. Smoke stacks emerged from what would have been a shoulder blade. There was a rumble, tectonic-deep, coming from its chest. Its engine was already active, its crew inside. Members of a diminutive ork subspecies scampered over the war machine, adjusting cables, tightening bolts, correcting the alignment of guns.

It looked like a mad construction that would fall apart the first time it tried to

move. Ghazan knew, though, that it would work, that it would walk, and that it would be as indestructible as it would be devastating in its actions. Its torso was ringed with gun emplacements. Its right arm had twin-linked cannons, each with a barrel almost wide enough for a man to stand inside. Its left ended in a power claw the size of a Rhino.

The Stompa appeared to be imbued with the same excessive strength as everything else associated with the orks on this moon. If it arrived before the bastion, it would be unstoppable. The Iron Guard would be destroyed within minutes. There was precious little that the White Scars had in their arsenal that could do more than dent the monster. The Fifth Brotherhood would fight until the end, but if the other Battlewagons were still active, then with their strength added to the Stompa's, the end would not be long in coming.

'Is it completed?' Temur asked.

'Yes. And operational.'

Ghazan listened to Temur curse under his breath.

'It will be teleported,' the Stormseer added.

'Where are you?'

Ghazan described the cavern's location as best he could.

'We're on our way,' said Temur.

The ork psyker and the engineer were both here. The tech was overseeing the activation of the Stompa and preparing to climb aboard. The witch stood before Merentallas. It gave instructions to more underlings, who worked the controls of the psychic drain. The prisoner's back arched. The energy build-up spiked.

'There is no time,' Ghazan said. 'The teleporter is powering up.' No matter how quickly his brothers could travel through the complex, they would arrive too late.

'Do what you must,' Temur told him. 'For the Khan and the Emperor.'

'For the Khan and the Emperor.' Ghazan felt the fleeting touch of peace as he moved forwards. The constant, clawing sense of anticipation had vanished. Destiny was now. Fate was now. The fulfilment of his visions had arrived. He understood how mistaken he had been earlier to believe that the moment was upon him. He had not felt this calm. He had been responding to a prologue. Now the great act would begin.

He paused before entering the cave. If the orks in the Stompa decided to attack him, he would be dead in an instant. They would not dare attack, though, if doing so would put the teleporter at risk. He decided he could credit the psyker and the engineer with instilling that much discipline in their subordinates.

His first move was clear. If he could cripple the teleporter, the Stompa would

be stuck underground. He had told Tellathia that he would free the last prisoner. In this context, death was the best hope the eldar had of freedom. It was the one in Ghazan's power to grant.

He raised his bolter and fired.

As he did, he remembered that during the earlier battle, none of the eldar prisoners had been killed by ork fire, despite how copious it had been. Tellathia's warriors had been hit, but the bullets had left all within the cages untouched. Now Ghazan saw why. His shells exploded as they reached the cage, their energy dispersing with a ripple in the air.

There was a force field around the cage.

The orks on the ground sent a hail of bullets his way. The engineer ran for the Stompa. The psyker howled its rage and pointed its staff at him. Ghazan leapt from the opening. He landed in the middle of the rifle-wielding orks.

His mind reached into the ground itself. The bedrock answered his call. The stone rippled, heaving beneath the orks' feet, throwing them off balance. He turned, sweeping his staff in a wide circle. It was suffused with lightning, electrocuting the orks he struck.

Then lightning struck him in turn, rocking him back on his feet. Overloaded, his armour locked up for a moment. He dropped to one knee. The witch advanced on him, the electrical residue of the strike crackling around its eyes. The ork's snarl was also a smile, one of recognition. Ghazan realised that he had not been alone in the anticipation of this moment.

Already, the witch's energy was again approaching an explosive level. The greenskin was in a state of unceasing battle-wrath. Ghazan was still attuned to the voice of the moon's bones. He yanked at the earth. A slab of granite erupted from the floor. It knocked the witch over and Ghazan ran forwards, raising his staff to bring it down through the psyker's skull.

He almost didn't hear the whine. Almost didn't recognise what it meant. But as he raised the staff, he realised something was coming to life at his back. He threw himself to the left in a roll. Huge bullets shrieked through the air where his head had been the moment before. They blew rock chunks out of the cave wall. The whine of the gun revving up had become a huge, thudding drum roll.

The ork witch scrambled away in the other direction, back towards the prisoner. The battle had taken Ghazan too far from that position. The crew of the Stompa could not fire the main cannons without destroying everything in the cavern, but the smaller guns could target Ghazan without fear of wrecking the teleporter or the machine of psychic torture that powered it. The witch was

already standing once more. It was laughing, the sound a maniacal braying loud even over the battering of the gun. It brandished its staff. Green fire coruscated down its length.

The gun tracked Ghazan's roll into the other orks on the cavern floor. The ones it hit became explosions of blood and bone. The rest ran for cover, shooting at Ghazan all the while. He lunged to his feet, and was almost knocked off them again when another blast from the psyker's eyes struck the ground. He was under attack from too many directions. He couldn't focus on one enemy without being taken down by another.

He turned for aid from earth to air. Once again, he made himself wind. He shot towards the Stompa. The orks tried to correct their aim, but he was already at the base of the monster before they were able to take in which way he was moving. Shutters had opened in the lower section of the skirt: more guns being brought to bear on him. He leapt up. One-handed, he grabbed the lower edge of the nearest opening and hauled himself through into a cramped compartment of uneven metal walls, an iron blister pressing into the body of the Stompa. He hit the orks inside like a ceramite bullet. His speed was such that he didn't have to use a weapon. The impact shattered their bones and smashed the gun from its mount.

He stopped, feeling the moment of dizziness that came with the release of warp energy and the return to a normal pace. He rammed the weighted end of his staff through the skulls of the two orks in the compartment, silencing their snarls.

Outside, the witch and the rest of the orks were racing towards the shutter. The sight and their howls afforded him a rare form of grim pleasure. He had never before seen true outrage in an ork. It was there now. Even the greenskins had a conception of the holy, as debased and erroneous as it might be. They had their false gods, and the Stompa was in their form. He was trespassing on sacred ground.

He would do worse yet.

The psyker held back as the other orks ran pell-mell for his position. They were not firing yet at their own vehicle. Ghazan tossed a frag grenade out of the shutter. It bounced once, then exploded in mid-air into the faces of the charging orks. Two more died instantly, their torsos blown apart. The others started firing. Ghazan was under good cover. He used his bolt pistol to bring even more down with one skull shot after another.

The ork psyker retreated further, taking cover beyond the line of sight provided by the shutter. It hid somewhere to the left. Ghazan did not oblige the witch by poking his head out to have it consumed by orkish lightning. He killed

a few more of the underlings, then left the gunner's compartment.

He was in the workings surrounding the Stompa's right leg. The interior was a tangle of catwalks, ladders twisting around pistons the size of cathedral pillars, gears as big as Chimeras. The space was cramped, humid with steam, choking with smoke, dripping with grease, and the behemoth wasn't yet in motion. As immense as the leg was, it was short in proportion to the rest of the Stompa. The machine would not stride across the landscape with the majesty of a Titan. It would rock and stumble with the clumsy, unstoppable momentum of a walking rockslide.

The giant pistons rose at a diagonal. Midway up the skirt, they entered a great enclosure. Inside that, Ghazan thought, he would find the Stompa's motive power. It would be the heart of the beast. It would be where he must plant his tulwar.

Mixing with the clamour of grinding machinery was the howling of the orks. They were rushing out of artillery and control blisters, leaping down the ladders and stairs, coming to kill the invader. Ghazan welcomed their folly. He slammed his staff against the metal decking. 'Look upon me, xenos filth!' he shouted. 'I bring you the fury of Chogoris!'

He didn't expect them to understand his words. They would comprehend his actions well enough. He stood where he was, an unmoving, inviting target. In a few moments, he would be surrounded. His pursuers from the floor of the cavern were climbing in through the open shutter. The orks on all sides were frenzied, in a state beyond rage, and yet no shots were fired. Whether their hands were stayed by religious awe of the Stompa, or a base level of self-preservation, Ghazan neither knew nor cared.

He was barely aware of their threat. He was conscious of them only as vectors of approach, and as vermin about to be swept from the sight of the Emperor and the Khan. He was with the storm again. He was the storm. The unmaking of all order that was the immaterium flowed through his being, and he imposed a shape upon it. He took that which was nothing and turned it into the most primal form of existence: the purity of lightning. Electrical hell built up in his frame until it seemed his flesh and bones and blood had become nothing more than a negative phantom, the searing afterimage of a shape that would vanish as it released the thunder.

At the last moment before he would be consumed by the energy he had summoned, he unleashed it. The lightning of the steppes struck the iron of the Stompa. The interior flashed with the catastrophic electrical discharge. The orks

screamed. The bolt lifted them all, hurling them about the interior with enough force to smash their bones to dust against the metal of their creation. The superheated air turned all moisture into scalding steam. The stench of cooked flesh filled Ghazan's nostrils. The smoke of incineration roiled through the interior of the Stompa. The electrocuted were a great choir, their shriek a stuttering crescendo. And then the thunder came, a gigantic, terminal clap that snapped time in two. On one side of the cleavage: the screams of brutes, the gigantic white noise of energy's eruption. On the other: silence.

As he started moving again, Ghazan thought that it was a singular thing that there could be silence inside the Stompa. The din was, in truth, greater than ever. The engine's rumble was a tortured fibrillation. The gears ground against each other as if at war. But there was silence. The voices of the orks had been stilled. All of them. Ghazan had turned the greenskins into carbonised corpses. They lay in heaps and angles. Many had become part of the wounded machinery.

He strode through them, kicking them apart where they blocked his way. He attached his staff to a maglock on his backpack and climbed the ladders towards the engine compartment. He reached a catwalk that ran around the perimeter of the enclosure. He looked down. He saw flames from ruptured gas conduits. He saw sparks of ongoing secondary electrical damage. He saw no movement of anything living.

He walked around the metal shell. It was sealed. Pistons and cables ran in and out of it, but there was no entrance. Whatever the nature of the power source the orks had assembled, once it was in operation, they had no interest in gaining access to it. Perhaps it would be fatal to do so. Ghazan thought of the ruptured cores of plasma engines.

The stillness ended with the inarticulate shouts of the witch. Ghazan looked over the edge of the circular decking. The psyker had entered the Stompa through an opening on the other side of the skirt. It stood near the base of the left piston, gazing up at Ghazan. Its eyes glowed with energy. It seemed to be waiting.

'Well?' Ghazan called down. He trusted that the mockery in his tone crossed the barriers of language. 'How long do we intend to delay the moment? I know you want this fight. Show me how ridiculous your worst is.'

He would not go down. He would fight the witch here, where he might also kill the Stompa.

The witch responded in an unexpected fashion. It laughed. It was the sole ork alive in this space. The damage to the vehicle was already considerable. But it

laughed as if Ghazan had fallen into a trap. It raced towards him, disdaining ladders and even stairs, leaping from level to level as if being carried by its unholy energy.

Ghazan left his pistol maglocked to his thigh. Shells would not stop this creature. He pulled the staff off his back. He held it crosswise before him. As he braced himself, he wondered how the ork could be supercharged in this fashion. He had witnessed earlier how it drew energy from the collective war madness of its fellows. Here they were all dead. Yet the witch was stronger than ever.

The ork made one more jump, a huge one. It rose several metres straight up, higher than Ghazan. It had its staff raised above its head. As it landed, it brought the staff slashing down at the Stormseer. It shouted with such fury that it spat blood.

The two staffs clashed.

The ork's psychic assault was enormous. For the second time, lightning struck the interior of the Stompa. It was lightning in a form Ghazan had never encountered. It had none of the purity of the true storm. It was electricity born of aggression itself. It was the quintessence of ork being. If he had not been prepared, it would have incinerated him.

He tried to push back. But the energy he unleashed was barely enough to hold the ork at bay. The witch hit him harder, then harder yet. Its energy kept growing. The more it battered him, the stronger it became. The ork was untiring, while Ghazan felt the gradual unravelling that accompanied his own psychic exhaustion.

Where was the ork getting its strength?

With a still greater spike, the witch's attack blasted at his defences against the immaterium. Instead of shoring them up, he let them fall and his consciousness rode the explosion deep into the insanity of the warp.

If he lost his grip on his conception of self, his mind would be scattered on the waves of the immaterium, and his body turned to ash. The pull of disintegration grew stronger.

He held fast. He was Ghazan of the White Scars. He was a Stormseer.

Stormseer.

He saw the coherent powers that used the warp. He saw a line of force feeding the ork. He could not divine what it was, but its strength was gigantic. It was the source of the excess on this moon. The orks were too strong, too large, too inventive, too powerful. Yet though the orks were fuelled by this current, it was not of them.

Perhaps, then, he could use it himself.

Temptation rushed him towards the current. He could plunge into it. He could turn it against the ork. He could make it his own. He could use its immensity and its anger to make a victory of every battle, to make battle itself a victory, to make war and more war, always and eternally war, and war, and war...

No.

Stormseer.

If he did this, he would betray the Emperor and the Khan. He would betray his own identity. With fading strength, he rejected an influx of unlimited power.

He made a choice.

He sought the pure storm, the full storm of Chogoris. He found it. *He saw it.* It was there in the warp, a potential needing a thought and a faith strong enough to shape it. And once he saw the storm, he wielded it.

He fought back. He countered the rage of a species with the storm of a world's soul. He struck with wind and lightning together. Into the cramped space of the Stompa's interior, he brought a hurricane. He stood firm as winds of hundreds of kilometres an hour slammed against the ork psyker. Cascades of lightning struck it. The witch stumbled. It absorbed the electrical energy into its own, but its attack began to lose coherence. Ghazan encompassed the hurricane with his will, honed it into concentrated form. He fused winds and lightning. His shout was the storm, and he sent all its kinetic and electrical rage coursing down the staff.

What hit the ork was annihilation. The beast's cry was cut short. It flew backwards into the metal shell. Its own attack lost all direction. The psychic energy was released. The explosion blinded Ghazan. A fragment of the time and space of the materium was destroyed.

Cataclysm. Creation and destruction were one. The possibility of the greatest storm, one that would sweep the cosmos before it, hovered at the edge of realisation. Then the world returned. Ghazan was lying at the base of a piston. He was wedged deeply into buckled metal. He had been hurled here like a cannon shell, though he had no memory of the violence. Above him, he saw the shell around the Stompa's engine fractured like an eggshell. Light from the heart of a violent green star shone through the cracks, outlining the corpse of the ork psyker.

The light pulsed harder. Something in the core of the Stompa was screaming to be born.

Ghazan pried himself free of the metal. His face was badly burned, and he could feel bones moving in his torso. There was a gun emplacement just above

him. He climbed into it and out of the shutter.

The eldar prisoner was looking at him. Ghazan walked across the teleporter platform, past the strewn bodies of the orks. Behind him, the humming whine of the Stompa's approaching death continued to build.

Merentallas was a powerful psyker. That was clear, even with his strength shackled to the machine. He would have to be formidable, if he alone was enough to teleport something as big as the Stompa. His body had been greatly weakened by his imprisonment. It also seemed to be undergoing a transformation. The eldar had a quality of translucence, as if he were a liminal form between flesh and crystal. He spoke to Ghazan in Gothic, and his voice was crystalline too, a distant chime at the end of a long tunnel. 'Are they all dead?'

'They are.'

'Though the army is not defeated.'

'No. The main force is on the offensive.'

The eldar nodded, accepting a fact he had already known. 'Then do not free me. The orks must not triumph in this system.'

'They will not,' Ghazan assured him.

'You have no idea how vital their defeat is.' His smile was bitter. 'I envy you, human. I envy your wealth of choices.'

'I had none today.'

'You did. You found the path to your victory. I thought I had a choice. I do not. To stop the orks here, I must place my faith in the future choices of your species.'

'I don't understand.'

The psyker looked past Ghazan's shoulder at the Stompa. 'The end of that vehicle is almost upon us. If you want to save your fellows who are fighting the ork army, you should alert them.' He closed his eyes. His body contracted in on itself. Psychic energy crackled.

'What are you doing?' Ghazan demanded.

'What I must.'

The teleporter platform began to hum.

Ghazan opened the vox-channel to Temur.

The warning came to retreat behind the bastion walls. 'We are already there,' Meixner told Temur. There were still Battlewagons in the field, and the thousands of orks that had arrived in a wave had swept the remains of the Iron Guard away. The Thunderhawk had succeeded in killing one more tank, but it

was limping through the air, one engine smoking. The White Scars assault squad had delayed the orks long enough for what was left of the Iron Guard to retreat to the final defensive position. But that was all. The moves were finished.

The bastion was crumbling. Its walls had been hammered by cannon fire. They were plasteel and rockcrete rubble now. Cover behind which to shoot. Nothing more. Meixner had a panoramic view of the orks massing on the plain below the plateau, and the tanks moving towards its base. He imagined his command would exist for at most another hour.

There was a flash at the far end of the plain. Meixner's jaw dropped. The Stompa towered above the field. The orks cheered its arrival. A green wave prepared to rise up and swallow the bastion.

Meixner wondered why the Stompa wasn't moving.

Temur's warning kept coming over the vox: *Take cover. Take cover. Take cover.*

Meixner dropped behind his chunk of wall.

A green sun incinerated the plain with its birth cry.



EPILOGUE

Merentallas was dead. The energy that the teleporter had drained from him had reduced him to a husk. Ghazan stood for a moment before the body, honouring the sacrifice. Then he crossed the cavern. On the other side was a tunnel that had been concealed by the Stompa. Cables ran into it from the teleporter pad. After the Stompa had vanished, the machine had not shut down right away. It had dragged a few more seconds of use out of its captive. There had been a second energy burst in the tunnel.

The passage was a short one. At its end was a small cavern. In it was another platform, just large enough for an individual. There was also another set of controls. Ghazan stared at the device, a sick certainty in his gut. He was still there when the brotherhood arrived.

Temur joined him. 'I have heard from the *Khajog's Stand*. The orks have been exterminated.'

Ghazan nodded. 'Good.'

'You seem troubled.'

Ghazan gestured at the teleporter. 'I believe the ork engineer has escaped. We have only half a victory.'

'We will send a warning to the Raven Guard planetside,' said Temur. He hesitated. 'Or is your fate tied to that ork, too?'

'It isn't,' Ghazan said. The tugging of destiny that had driven him to this system had ceased. He felt a sense of release, a pause between the commands of his visions.

'You were right,' Temur said. 'I should not have doubted your judgement.'

Ghazan laughed softly. 'The line between judgement and compulsion is a thin one.'

But there is one, he thought. He remembered the moment when he had glimpsed the force that was feeding the ork witch. He had turned away from making that power his own.

He saw his path ahead with a new clarity.

He had chosen his compulsion, and the choice had been real.

He had chosen the storm.

SHADOW CAPTAIN



PROLOGUE

The orks raced over their dead. They trampled the fallen, crushed bodies to pulp beneath treads and wheels, and left a wake of their own blood with every metre of their advance. Their battle joy raged. It shook the air itself.

The aggression wave travelled ahead of the horde. It was a continuous battering. There was no adapting to it. The furious revel kept growing. The wave built on itself, a monstrous, mountainous psychic shock that never crested and never troughed, yet crashed and crashed and crashed against the eldar. The orks rode the crest of the wave, howling with the glee of absolute destruction. They came to smash and sever, shoot and burn. They came for a violence so pure, victory was incidental.

That would not make it any less real. Or catastrophic.

Though they died by the hundreds, the orks didn't care. They were ecstatic. The deaths didn't matter. And they were closing in on the city. Though they could not know what its capture truly meant, that didn't matter either.

The orks raced over their dead, and they raced towards victory.

Perched in the high branches of a conifer at the edge of a narrow forest, Alathannas pulled the trigger of his long rifle with a steady rhythm. Every second, he dropped another ork, taking his prey out with a concentrated energy bolt between the eyes. He chose the big targets. The larger the ork, the more authority it wielded. His hope: kill enough leaders to create confusion in the ranks and slow down the advance.

The reality: there were so many big orks. Too many.

On the plain before him, the warriors of Saim-Hann fought to stem the green tide. Jetbikes streaked the length of the front lines, their shuriken catapults shredding the orks into strips. They were supported by a squadron of Vypers, whose rear-mounted bright lances struck at the ork battlewagons. The harvest of death was immense. The eldar irrigated the plain with ork blood. And the brutes

came on. The war-fire in their veins burned ever higher. Nothing would turn them back. Only total annihilation would stop them.

It would also be the one thing that would end the Saim-Hann struggle. Alathannas would snipe his prey until he was ground beneath the wheels of the ork tanks. And that, he knew, was his likely end. The orks had the numbers for a war of extermination. The eldar did not.

Alathannas fought the temptation to look behind. He knew what there was to see. Nothing would have changed. If it had, if the thing he both hoped and feared was transpiring, he would hear the change. If he turned his head, he would miss an opportunity for at least one more precious kill. In exchange, all he would see would be the reminder of how little space and how little time the Saim-Hann had left.

The forest was barely a hundred metres wide. It ran north and south a few thousand metres in either direction from the ranger's position, marking the end of the plain. The land sloped downwards through the trees. Beyond the forest was an even narrower strip of barren, rocky ground, ending at a deep gorge. The river at the bottom was a thin ribbon. The bridge that spanned the gorge was the only access to the western side of the city.

The city whose beauty had died millennia before. The city that was now a brutal cluster of human spires. The city that had become an aesthetic scab on the surface of the planet.

The city that the orks must not take.

Alathannas aimed and fired, aimed and fired. Every kill was a handful of water taken from the ocean. Every shot was a denial of the futility of what he was doing. Every pull of the trigger was an act of defiance. He was fighting as hard against his own despair as he was against the orks.

Despair. The state had the toxic allure of simple logic. In the adjacent system, the orks and tyranids clashed, destroying each other by the millions, and thus strengthening each other. The orks were spilling out of their empire, and now they had come to this system. Perhaps their initial incursion had been the result of luck. The improbable played a dismayingly crucial role in the successes of the orks.

The first orks into the system were a terrible sign. The first on the planet were catastrophic. Alathannas was sure that the orks did not understand how important the world was to them. Their understanding, though, was irrelevant. They wanted the world, and so they would take it, and given enough time, in the end, they would find the secret.

In the end. Yes, that would be the end. For uncountable systems. Alathannas could bring himself to face the material destruction that would follow. He refused to imagine the spiritual damage that would strike the eldar.

The one comfort that might come from failure on this day would be not living to see its consequences. But such comfort was cowardice. It was not on the path down which Alathannas was travelling.

‘I am here,’ he whispered. He was here for his kin. He had voyaged far from the craftworld. It had been so long since he had seen it that his memories of home were growing distant to him, curiosities without pain, and he knew that his emotional distance did not inspire trust. He could wish that his actions would prove his loyalty, though he had his doubts. He knew how important this mission was, and what its failure would mean. He felt the dread of those consequences so acutely that he nurtured a forbidden hope. Though he risked treason even to think of this event, he would welcome it.

He could see how the battle was going. The orks were pushing the eldar back. In another few minutes, the Saim-Hann would be forced to fight in the woods. The wave of orks might break into foam in the trees, but the skimmers would be hampered, too. The horde’s advance would continue. The orks would push the eldar to the bridge. This was inevitable. It was as true as if it had already happened.

Now he felt a greater fatalism with each pull of the trigger. It might even be the despair after all. A battlewagon took out a Vyper with its big gun, brutish excess of explosive triumphing over the perfected art of war. The skimmer’s elegant flight turned into a rolling fireball, its pilot and gunner vanishing into the wraithbone pyre. The other Vypers slashed through the troops and concentrated their lances at the tank, bringing the energy to bear on a single point of the lower rear armour. They ruptured the fuel tank, ignited it, and rewarded fire with fire.

But the green tide was endless. The front lines of the orks were ragged, but they were also amorphous, spreading like liquid across the plain, defying the eldar attempts to hold them back. The skimmers were no longer in front of the ork army. They were in its midst. There were more tanks coming, and ahead of them were the raving mechanical monsters that the orks created by wiring their kin into armoured cylinders. Piston legs smashed into the ground with all the pained rage of the pilots. Articulated metal arms with pincers or snarling blades for hands waved with hunger. The guns on either side of the cylinders unleashed a perpetual stream of projectiles whose size and velocity rendered their primitive nature irrelevant.

The walkers were mad. And they were lethal. Even as the Vypers killed the battlegroup, three of the walkers lurched forwards with a sudden unity and surrounded a jetbike. The density of the orks was slowing the skimmers down, hampering their movement. The jetbike pilot, cut off from his squadron, tried to evade the orks. He couldn't. Three pairs of arms fell on his ride. He was already dead before three of his comrades managed a return pass to come to his aid. They shot the arms off one of the walkers, but the central mass of the beast survived their attack. The cluster of cylinders turned as one. They met the jetbikes head-on. Their fire was unavoidable, devastating. Two of the skimmers, their pilots dead, slammed into the walkers. The conflagration spread wide, taking out the third jetbike and every ork within a dozen metres.

Six eldar had died in the last few seconds compared to scores of orks.

The advantage was to the orks.

From a great distance, Alathannas realised he was whispering curses. He mouthed the oaths without emotion. He killed the orks without hope. Another few seconds, and he would have to retreat. The tide was lapping at the edge of the forest.

Then, over the primal howl of the orks and the sear of energy bolts, he heard it. The event was beginning. His forbidden wish was coming to pass. Still he exercised discipline, and did not look towards the city until the orks were only moments away. He dropped down from his tree and ran deeper into the woods. Beneath his cameleoline cloak, he was almost invisible. Once their numbers were great enough, though, the orks wouldn't have to see him to crush him beneath their onslaught.

Alathannas reached the edge of the woods. He had a clear view across the gorge to the city, and of the territory to the south and west, on the other side of the river, where the elevation dropped and the river once more meandered through a plain. He saw the streaks in the sky. He gave himself a few seconds to observe the descent of tears of metal. The humans were coming. They were the one hope left against the orks.

The ranger's despair retreated. His dread, however, did not.

It grew worse.



CHAPTER ONE

The command tent stood in the centre of the Raven Guard base. Its walls flapped sluggishly in the wind that blew over the wide plain. Inside, surrounded by his sergeants, Reszasz Krevaan leaned over the tactarium table, eyeing the hololithic map of the region.

‘They’re flanking, Shadow Captain,’ Sergeant Behrasi said.

Krevaan traced a route on the map leading down from the flash point at the bridge. ‘Sweeping around to the south?’ he asked.

‘Yes, as expected.’

‘Any signs that they care about our presence?’ It was most likely that the orks had seen the drop pods come down, though he knew, given their single-minded focus on the eldar, that it was possible they were unaware of the Raven Guard’s presence. But he could not risk such an assumption. Krevaan did not believe in the ignorant act. Information was the most potent weapon he knew. The warrior in the dark required a battle-barge. The one with full knowledge of the enemy needed only a blade.

‘The greenskins appear to be focused on the eldar,’ Behrasi told him. ‘Not one of them has shown any interest in this location.’

‘Good. Thank you, brother-sergeant.’ He thought for a moment while the rest of his sergeants waited. If the orks wanted a fight, they would find the Raven Guard Eighth Company ready. The drop pods had landed about a kilometre south of the city of Reclamation, and Krevaan had ordered the base established here. The location was nondescript. It was not a defensible position, a fact that held exactly no importance for Krevaan. The Raven Guard were on the attack on Lepidus Prime. If they wound up on the defence, then they had already failed their mission. The location was a useful one for its openness. Enemies would be visible from a great distance.

‘Have you reached my fellow captains?’ Krevaan asked Akrallas, who was

operating the vox.

‘I have Captain Mulcebar. No luck with Temur Khan.’

‘Anything at all from the moon?’

‘Fragmentary. Some brief moments from the Mordian Iron Guard.’

‘Which leads me to guess you are hearing nothing good.’

‘It seems the orks have a great deal of heavy armour on the moon as well.’

‘The White Scars must be delighted,’ Krevaan muttered. He indulged in a moment of irony at the expense of the sons of Chogoris, but only a moment. Though the Raven Guard had no love for the White Scars, the difficulties that Temur was facing had implications for them all. The Imperial forces had expected the orks to be formidable, but based on how long they were known to have been in the Lepidus system, it didn’t seem possible for them to have ramped up tank production to such a degree. Yet they had. That was the reality of the situation. Krevaan accepted that. There was information that was missing. That bothered him more.

He took the handset from Akrallas. He was connected to Mulcebar, captain of the Salamanders Fifth Company, on the strike cruiser *Verdict of the Anvil*. ‘Has there been any change?’ he asked Mulcebar.

‘None. All quiet.’

‘That won’t last. We are just getting started.’ He was aware that his optimism sounded forced. The plan was ambitious. The Overfiend ork had defiled an Imperial system. The White Scars, the Raven Guard and the Salamanders would do more than crush the invading force: they would use the Overfiend’s own temerity against the warlord. For whatever reason, the Overfiend had committed massive resources to conquering Lepidus. If the beast wanted the system badly enough, the thinking went, important losses might draw it out of Octarius to take personal charge of the invasion. Greenskin psychology was not sophisticated. A good fight, frustrated desire and a point of pride would be enough to call the monster forth from the safety of its stronghold.

So the White Scars would destroy the heavy armour manufactory on the moon of Lepidus Prime. The Raven Guard would put an end to the threat on the planet, and so preserve the Imperial colony. At the edge of the system, the Salamanders would wait in the *Verdict of the Anvil* for the Overfiend to show itself.

Yes, an ambitious plan. Sound as far as it went. Krevaan accepted the merits of its conception. He was troubled by its lacunae. *For whatever reason*. Orks were creatures of aggression and impulse. Krevaan had rarely known them to do

anything for a reason. But ‘rarely’ wasn’t ‘never’. When there was discernible reason behind ork actions, that was when they were at their most profoundly dangerous, as Armageddon had learned to its cost. The orks had not hit Lepidus as a raiding force. This was a campaign. The manufactorum was proof of that. And now silence from Temur and the White Scars. Signs that something was calling very forcefully to the orks.

‘If we’re just getting started,’ Mulcebar said, ‘I wish our start were more assured. We cannot raise Temur on the vox.’

‘Nor can we.’

‘And your situation?’

‘Interesting.’

‘When a Raven Guard tells me something is interesting,’ said Mulcebar, ‘I brace myself for the worst.’

‘There is an eldar force combating the orks.’

‘Oh. That *is* interesting.’

‘Puzzling, too.’ Unknowns on the moon. Unknowns on Lepidus Prime. Too many. Mulcebar was right to be wary. ‘To all appearances, their primary objective is to prevent the orks from taking Reclamation.’

‘Why would the eldar concern themselves with the fate of one of our cities?’

‘Exactly.’

The Salamander was silent for a moment, taking in the full contours of the mystery. Then he said, ‘What are your plans?’

‘The orks are more numerous and better equipped than the Navy’s reports to us had suggested. The eldar might be useful. The orks won’t see us coming.’

Mulcebar chuckled. ‘Does any foe see the Raven Guard coming?’

‘Not if I can help it,’ Krevaan admitted. ‘Good hunting, brother.’

‘And to you.’

Krevaan turned back to his officers. ‘Brother-Sergeant Caeligus, take your squad to the bridge.’ The span over the gorge was the clear focus of the struggle between the two xenos races. He would show eldar and greenskins alike that control of the gateway to Reclamation belonged to neither. ‘Prepare it for demolition. Do not destroy it until you receive my command. Sergeant Behrasi, how large is the ork flanking movement?’

‘It is a considerable one. No heavy vehicles, but a number of smaller ones. They’re putting a premium on speed.’

‘Your estimation?’

‘If they manage to come up behind the eldar, that war is finished.’

‘Then we shall prolong it.’

Caeligus and his men approached the bridge through the city. They had the streets to themselves. The orks were still a few kilometres distant, but the roar of their invasion had already arrived. An endless howl filled the air and bounced off the façades. The echoes of gunfire and cannon shells were a constant thunder. The sound was a terrible promise of destruction to come.

The citizens of Reclamation were off the streets. They hid behind their walls. Caeligus understood the mortals’ impulse to seek refuge. He wondered, though, whether *they* understood how pointless the attempt was. If the orks entered the city, there would be no defence, no shelter. No mercy.

The human occupation of Lepidus Prime was a relatively recent one. Reclamation had been established only in the last century. The planet was verdant, fertile, temperate, and free of xenos taint, but the system’s proximity to Octarius had made it an uncertain proposition. When it had appeared, to the more optimistic members of the Adeptus Administratum, that the Overfiend’s war with the tyranids would keep both xenos horrors occupied with each other indefinitely, permission had been granted for colonisation. The founders of Reclamation were the descendants of the noble families of Orrok, the survivors who had fled the ork takeover of Octarius hundreds of years before.

The spread of the colony had been slow. Reclamation remained the only major population centre. There were a few small clusters of homes on farmland some distance to the east, but most of those had been abandoned as the ork invasion had dawned. The humans had withdrawn into their city. Caeligus had heard a few of the exchanges that his captain had had with the planetary governor, Aloysius Kesmir. The man’s hololith revealed him as a thin creature, whose bones seemed slightly too long for his skin. He spoke with a mixture of fear and stubbornness. He was terrified of the orks, but determined to stand his ground.

Or at least remain on it, while someone else actually fought the war. Caeligus had the impression that the governor was a good exemplar of the populace. He was unimpressed, but the possible unworthiness of the people of Lepidus was of no concern to the Raven Guard. They had not come to defend a colony. They had come to exterminate an enemy.

As he passed through the city, though, he looked at it with interest. Its architecture was not what he had expected in something so new. He saw plenty of prefab rockcrete, but the city was just old enough that the colony’s initial homogeneity had eroded. Modifications and additions were breaking down the

uniformity, differentiating one hab zone from another, creating a sense of local character.

None of this was surprising. What did surprise Caeligus was that there were frequent signs of much greater age. Some of the variations in construction appeared original. There were foundations, just visible above ground, that were not rockcrete. They were something else, a material that appeared to be almost organic. Caeligus had the impression of something that had been grown. He saw one building after another that had clearly been built atop a pre-existing structure. Yet he knew that, prior to the colonisation, Lepidus Prime had been uninhabited for as long as it had appeared in Imperial records.

When the squad reached the bridge, he saw that it, too, was an anomaly. The surface of its span was not of Imperial construction. There were three arches across its width: one at each end, and one in the middle. The iconography chiselled into their surface was Imperial in subject, but the images looked like emendations. Caeligus suspected they had been added to wipe the memory of something blasphemous from the face of the marble.

He walked to the foot of the bridge. On the other side of the gorge, the eldar were fighting hard. Most of them were mounted on skimmers the same deep crimson as their armour. Their movements through the trees were as sinuous as their strikes were rapid. They waged war with a quicksilver, alien elegance. They would be, Caeligus could tell, dangerous opponents.

But what Krevaan had heard was true. Their position was untenable. They should retreat much further. Given the size of their force compared to the overwhelming numbers of orks, the eldar were using the wrong tactics. The orks were primarily infantry, and Caeligus could hear tanks and blasphemous Dreadnought imitations crashing their way through the forest. The eldar should be using their greater mobility and speed to full advantage. They should already have crossed the bridge, pulling back to return in harrying attacks against the ork flanks. Instead, they were holding their ground. They weren't just risking their own annihilation; they were ensuring it.

The only possible reason for not retreating was an attempt to defend the city. The eldar were mysterious, unknowable, and untrustworthy. But they were not fools. Yet a suicidal defence of a human city was an action so beyond fathoming that Caeligus wondered if the entire race was mad.

‘What do they think they’re doing?’ Havran asked.

Caeligus shook his head. ‘If they think they’re doing anything other than offering themselves up to a slow slaughter, they’re mistaken. But their insanity is

not our concern. Let's get that bridge ready to fall.'

Setting the melta bombs took a matter of minutes. The eldar were dying, but managing to hold the orks at bay. Caeligus knew them to be skilled warriors. He was still impressed. And more and more puzzled. They were fighting with last-stand desperation. Caeligus could think of few human forces that would give up so much for a city whose strategic value, in the final analysis, was nil. He believed in the defence of Reclamation, certainly. But the primary mission was the extermination of the orks. Perhaps the Salamanders would feel differently.

He spoke into his vox-bead. 'The bridge is ready, Shadow Captain.'

'The orks are still on the other side?'

'Both races are. We can cut off access to the west side of Reclamation at a moment's notice.'

'Good. Stand ready, but do nothing.'

Vaanis was holding a detonator. He was watching Caeligus for the signal. The sergeant shook his head. 'Shadow Captain,' he said, 'at this moment, neither the orks nor the eldar are approaching the city. We can finish our job here and join your assault.'

'Remain at your current position,' Krevaan said. 'Do *not* destroy the bridge without my express order. Keep me informed of any changes in the situation. Am I clear?'

'You are, Shadow Captain.'

Krevaan signed off. Caeligus said to the squad, 'We wait.'

'For what?' Havran asked.

'I don't know,' Caeligus admitted. He was frustrated by Krevaan's decision. He was not, however, embarrassed to reveal that he did not understand the reasons behind it. The captain treated information with the care due any great weapon. He was not deceptive with his battle-brothers. Caeligus did not think Krevaan had ever kept secrets that the company should have known about. But he guarded his thoughts jealously. Caeligus had never been able to read his face.

He tried. He had tried earlier, during the briefing. Krevaan's expressions were as opaque as if he were wearing his helmet. Caeligus knew the captain would not delay the demolition of the bridge without good motivation. He also knew that he would not be privy to those motives until Krevaan chose to reveal them. If ever.

Caeligus accepted all of this, but it still frustrated him.

He walked to the edge of the bridge. He watched the war on the other side. He watched skill struggle with ferocity. He saw the inevitable draw closer. He saw

extraordinary ability ground down a bit at a time, pushed closer and closer to oblivion. *Behrasi should be here*, he thought.

The other sergeant had a better appreciation for the finer aspects of tragedy.

A few thousand metres to the south of the bridge, Behrasi was a shadow among shadows. He was positioned at the edge of the tree line, before the narrow strip of land that ran between the forest and the gorge. The orks' flanking advance had one quality that Behrasi appreciated: it was direct. They were taking the most obvious route to trap the eldar in a vice: loop around the edge of the forest and back up again. They were charging at full speed, a mass of fury operating more on instinct than strategy. That made them easy to anticipate. Their route forward was obvious.

'There is a certain luxury in a foe who obediently enters the ambush,' Krevaan said.

Behrasi would have sworn the Shadow Captain hadn't been at his side a moment before. His years of service in Eighth Company had taught him to expect Krevaan's sudden appearances, even if he was never able to see his commander approach. Krevaan inhabited the shadows like no other warrior in Behrasi's experience. He carried the night within him. It was present, a cloak waiting to cover him, even in broad daylight. The shadows began in Krevaan's eyes. They lived there and emerged from there, as if the captain could blind whatever met his gaze.

Sometimes, when they felt particularly in the dark about the reasons behind Krevaan's decisions, and they attempted a futile parsing, Behrasi and Caeligus would wind up at the point of their captain's physical obscurity. Caeligus maintained that Krevaan was hard to read. Behrasi disagreed. He thought Krevaan was hard to *see*.

At a superficial level, Krevaan's features were not invisible. He had the same bleached pigmentation of all the Raven Guard. His features were sharp, the hollows of his cheeks and eye sockets so deep that his flesh seemed to be being absorbed by his skull. The effect was enhanced by his pronounced brow and cheekbones. His eyes were almost hidden. They were narrow, dark, glittering judgement. They saw everything, and revealed nothing.

And always, the shadows. Was it possible that his features themselves cast them? Was his face his own mask? The idea had occurred to Behrasi more than once. At other times, he assumed that he was seeing Krevaan's supreme skill at work. He had mastered wraith-slipping to the point that it was his natural state of

being. To pass unseen and unheard until the enemy's final moment had gone beyond instinct with Krevaan. It was no different from breathing, or from the beat of his hearts. Every action, at every moment, evaded the gaze of the observer. Behrasi took some pride in his own wraith-slipping, but even when Krevaan was standing directly before him, his impression of the captain was uncertain. Krevaan existed in the gaps between perception. It seemed to Behrasi that it was an act of conscious choice for Krevaan to step out of the shadows – a choice he rarely made. But this was not sorcery. It was a skill as material as the wielding of lightning claws.

Now Krevaan stood beside him, surveying the ambush preparations. They could hear the orks coming closer; perhaps still as much as a thousand metres away. The trap was set about a quarter of the way up the east side of the forest. The land was still high here, the gorge still deep. To the north, the eldar and the rest of the ork army were setting the woods on fire with their struggle.

‘The greenskins do not have too many routes open to them,’ Behrasi said.

‘Oh?’ Krevaan gestured to the trees behind them. ‘Are those trees an impenetrable barrier?’

‘For this style of attack...’

‘Precisely. These orks are wed to speed. Yet our arrival was clear. They have chosen to ignore us because we complicate the narrative of their battle.’

Behrasi smiled. ‘I don’t often think of the orks as complicated.’

‘Few do. Which is why the struggle for Armageddon was so desperate. The orks are fully capable of shadow raids. There are many dead warriors who have learned that lesson too late. Our good fortune is that these orks have not thought of that.’

‘They’re running with their first impulse.’

‘Yes.’

The answer was so noncommittal that Behrasi asked, ‘You think they aren’t, Shadow Captain?’

‘No, I think they are. But there are elements here that we do not understand.’

That was true. Behrasi gestured towards the battle in the north. ‘I don’t understand *that*.’

‘We are missing information,’ Krevaan said. ‘Our knowledge is incomplete, and that leads to mistakes.’ After a moment’s pause, he added, ‘As the orks are about to learn.’

If Behrasi had spoken those words, he would have smiled. He imagined that Krevaan did, though he could not tell. It was night, they were in the shadows of

the trees, and the captain was the ghost of a shape. Then, even as Behrasi looked, Krevaan was gone.

Behrasi turned his attention to other shadows around him. They were the members of his squad. Each Raven Guard was in position, a motionless absence ready to uncoil and become a streak of lethal dark. Two of the absences were huge: the Dreadnoughts Karom and Raust. Four squads of Eighth Company were waiting at the edge of a long strip of land. They were only on one side, under cover of the woods. Krevaan had ordered this distribution of the forces. It doubled the extent of the kill zone. There would be no enfilading fire.

‘We won’t need it,’ Krevaan had said. He had picked a particularly narrow strip of land. There were only about ten metres between the forest’s edge and the drop into the gorge.

The orks were close now. A huge snarl fell on the land. It came from engines, and it came from throats, and it was the sound of rampage. To the south, where the land dipped towards the plain, the orks appeared. At the head of the charge were warbikes. They fouled the air with exhaust, the noxious clouds darkening the night still further. They were followed by four-wheeled vehicles, each with a gunner on the rear turret. Behind them, after a gap, came the infantry.

Behrasi was startled by how small the gap was between the vehicles and the foot soldiers. The terrain was rougher here, and the route narrow, forcing even the most reckless ork riders to slow down. Even so, the other orks were *fast*. They were keeping pace with their mounted kin. They had travelled many kilometres since splitting off from the main force, and been moving at a full run the entire way. As the horde stormed past him, Behrasi watched the greenskins closely. There was no sign of exhaustion. They ran as if they were fresh. They were sprinting, and they were speeding up.

Krevaan had said it: *Our knowledge is incomplete*. The unanswered questions were about more than the eldar presence and their ferocious defence of Reclamation. There was something unusual about the orks. They were faster and more exultant than Behrasi was used to seeing, even in a race defined by its gigantic appetite for war. They were also bigger. The entire mob, even its most mundane members, was larger than the norm.

Don’t underestimate them, Behrasi thought.

His next thought was, *Kill them*.

The lead bikes ran over pressure sensors, triggering cluster mines. Swarms of bomblets flew upwards and exploded. The first bikes caught the brunt of the blasts. They disintegrated in the fireballs of their fuel tanks.

The orks coming behind overcorrected. One of them turned a hard right, and sailed into the air over the gorge. The ork screamed for the entire length of the plunge. Two more bikes went down, sliding and tumbling into the destruction of the others. Their explosions washed over the next. The orks' momentum drove them into a growing wreck. Now the sounds of metal and flesh were shrieks instead of roars. More mines ripped out the bottom of one of the buggies. It veered sideways and flipped over, crushing driver and gunner.

The way forward was blocked by a tangle of twisted vehicles and burning flesh. The orks at the front tried to stop, but the others, further back, could not see what was happening. They heard the sounds of war, saw flames and smoke, and pushed forward even harder. The carnage escalated. And when at last the horde began to react, to pull back from throwing itself on its own pyre, Krevaan's whisper came over the vox: 'Now.'

Along almost the entire length of the ork advance, the Raven Guard struck. They began with frag grenades. The blasts rippled over hundreds of metres. The jostling orks were so crowded together that their bodies muffled the explosions. Limbs and organs rose into the air, bubbles in a tar pit. The horde reacted with rage and confusion. The orks were being hit everywhere, and they could not see their enemy. Some of the greenskins blamed each other. They caused eddies of riot as they fought and died.

'Fire,' said Krevaan.

The night ripped the orks to pieces. Concentrated bolter fire smashed into them. The mass-reactive shells did more than slaughter. Their impact was such that the ork line was pushed back, closer to the drop. The more heedless ran, so intent on finding their enemies that they did not look at the ground beneath their feet. They pitched themselves into the void.

The casualties were great. The surprise was total. It was also brief. The orks recovered quickly. They were not concerned with the deaths of their brothers, as long as they were still in the fight. They began to return fire. Their weapons were crude. The guns were ridiculous in comparison to the bolters. But the orks still held the numerical advantage, and the barrage of bullets and flame took a toll. Behrasi heard the vox-chatter of damage reports begin. There was a sharp cry as one of his battle-brothers in another squad was brought down.

'Take them,' Krevaan said.

After one more burst of fire, the Raven Guard charged. Darkness snapped out from the trees at the orks. The Space Marines moved as one, maglocking their bolter rifles to their thighs and striking with lightning claws. A wall of ceramite

bladed with adamantium turned the ork lines into meat. The Dreadnoughts closed too, unstoppable as glaciers. The horde staggered again.

‘Space,’ Krevaan had said, ‘will be the other side of our attack.’

It was. There was nowhere for the orks to take another step back, but they did, and they fell by the scores. The war music changed again. The yells of rage were interrupted by the wet, staccato thuds of bodies hitting the rocks far below.

‘Forward!’ Behrasi called. ‘Push them forward!’ He slashed and stabbed with short, quick gestures. He opened throats and punctured eyes. He used the full weight of his power armour, taking no step without being grounded. He was a mass that would not retreat. Eighth Company advanced into the orks at a slow, measured pace while their claws struck with eyeblink speed.

The orks fell beneath Behrasi’s tread. And they fell from the cliff. Krevaan’s trap was wiping them from the face of Lepidus. Still, they fought. They fought well. The more heavily armoured orks were with the main force, destroying the eldar. These were the lighter infantry. They were here because they could move faster. They were no match for Adeptus Astartes. But Behrasi’s initial impression was correct. They were bigger, more ferocious. They struggled against him with an incandescent energy. Each greenskin was war given muscle, flesh and bone. They chopped at him with cleavers and clubs, shot him point-blank with shotguns that more than once blew up in the wielder’s hands. His armour turned away the blades and projectiles. The xenos filth could do little against him. Their battle was futile, their end preordained. Yet they attacked as if the Raven Guard were the ones on the defensive. They roared with a savage joy. They fought as if their victory was at hand until the actual second of their demise.

The Raven Guard finished their advance. Behrasi stopped one stride away from the drop. The mop-up was brief. He and his battle-brothers gutted the last few orks and tossed them over the edge. It was in the final minutes of the operation, when the mass of orks was reduced to individuals, that he found himself most troubled.

The orks were laughing at him.

Their numbers were down to a tiny handful, the massacre clear, and the orks showed no frustration or any other sign of acknowledging their defeat. But they laughed.

Behrasi silenced one more greenskin, and there were none left to fight. He looked up and down the line. The battle was over. The flanking force was gone. Apothecary Madaar was dealing with the wounded. There were only two battle-

brothers who had fallen, and whose progenoid glands he had to recover. The ambush had been a near-perfect success.

The laughter of the orks rang in Behrasi's ears. He tasted something bitter. Its flavour was uncannily like that of defeat.

Krevaan emerged from the smoke that surrounded the burning vehicles. 'Your evaluation, brother-sergeant?' he asked.

'Their confidence in the face of their extermination...'

'The laughter was troubling, wasn't it?'

'What is it that they know?'

Krevaan shook his head. 'There was nothing sly or cunning in that laughter. I believe it emerged from a fact of their being.' He looked back towards the struggle near the bridge. 'The question is not about what they know, but what we don't. We are too much in the dark.'

On the vox's company channel, Caeligus spoke. 'The eldar are moving towards the bridge.'

Krevaan thought for a moment before answering. The flames cast deeper shadows over his face. 'Let them cross,' he said. 'Help them cross. Then blow the bridge.'

Behrasi blinked in surprise. Caeligus said, 'Shadow Captain?'

'We will be with you before long.'

After Caeligus signed off, Behrasi said nothing. Krevaan heard him all the same. 'You have a question for me, brother-sergeant?'

'Why are we helping the eldar? Why not force the two races to finish their war? The orks would be weakened, and that is useful.'

'Because of what we were saying a moment ago. I wish to know what is happening on this planet.' Then he smiled. That was never a simple expression of pleasure with Krevaan. It was more like the arming of a weapon. 'Besides,' he said, 'I believe the eldar can be more usefully deployed.'



CHAPTER TWO

Looking across the bridge, Havran said, ‘They won’t make it.’

Caeligus thought he might be right. The fight in the woods, followed by a huge surge from the orks, had broken the coherence of the eldar lines. The vehicles had little room to manoeuvre. The orks were immobilising them and bringing them down with the force of a mob as much as they were with the fire from their tanks and their walking cans. A number of the eldar were on foot now, and even more vulnerable. Almost all of them were engaged in individual battles. They were trying to support one another, but the disorder brought by the orks was only growing worse. The eldar were drowning in the green tide. They had waited too long to retreat.

Help them cross. Krevaan’s order. It would take more than covering fire to do that now. Caeligus would have to engage the orks with his squad directly. To take the field in direct support of a xenos race revolted him. The Shadow Captain had his reasons. He always did. But not knowing what they were grated. Caeligus believed in the power of information too. He believed in being able to judge the value of decisions. And of orders.

He did not, however, believe in disobeying orders. ‘The eldar seem bent on losing,’ he said to Havran. ‘That would not be to our advantage.’ *Or so I gather,* he thought. ‘Brothers,’ he called to the squad, ‘the orks have been ignoring us. That is an insult. I will not tolerate it. Will you?’

They answered by joining him in formation at the bridge. ‘They do not look to the skies,’ Vaanis said.

‘They should,’ Caeligus snarled.

The jump packs of the assault squad flared. The ten Space Marines rose over the gorge. At the apex of their arc, Caeligus’s discontent evaporated. The reasons for the action became insignificant. He was airborne. His talons were extended. He was a raptor streaking down on prey.

‘Victorus aut mortis!’ he yelled in the same moment as the rest of the squad. The war cry froze the orks with surprise. They looked up, confused. Caeligus relished the stupid look on the greenskin’s face below him in the second before he hit the ground, driving his lightning talons all the way through the ork’s skull.

Squad Caeligus struck in a wedge formation. Vaanis and Havran anchored the two ends, on either side of the bridge access. The sergeant was at the head. They cut into the ork horde. The greenskins within the angle suddenly found themselves isolated from their brothers. Their confusion and rage did not last long. The Raven Guard killed them within seconds. Even as the rest of the mob began to react, the squad took to the skies again.

The orks started firing upwards. They were disorganised. Their attention was torn between the eldar on the ground and the airborne Space Marines. The eldar seized the opportunity. A brace of the larger skimmers broke through the tide and took up position in the space the Raven Guard had cleared at the bridge. Their turrets fired in a rotating, interlocking pattern, holding the ground, expanding the territory.

‘The tank,’ Caeligus ordered.

A battlewagon had emerged from the forest. Its side guns were tracking one of the smaller skimmers. Its cannon was turning towards the bridge. The squad came down on all sides of it. Caeligus and Kyremun took the roof. Kyremun butchered the greenskins riding on top of the tank, while Caeligus balanced on top of the main gun. He walked its length as it swung to the left, acquiring its firing targets. At the end, he dropped to all fours and threw a krak grenade into its mouth. On the flanks, the other gunners were silenced by bolter shots directly into the firing windows.

‘Up!’ Caeligus warned.

The squad lifted off. The gun fired at the same moment as the shaped charge of the grenade blasted inward. The top half of the tank exploded. The twisted gun flipped forward to crush the orks who had been rushing in to repel the attackers.

Many of the orks were losing interest in the eldar. They collided with each other as they tried to follow the flights of the Raven Guard. The disorder in their ranks grew with the rising casualties. Granted breathing space, the eldar gathered their force together. Their grip on the land before the bridge became more assured. Vehicles and foot soldiers converged on that point.

The orks raged. Their attacks became more frenzied. They did not become more accurate. They killed each other in their efforts to take down Caeligus and

his brothers. And so they added to their own confusion.

The Raven Guard angled down to a point where the orks were spilling out of the forest, in a direct line with the bridge. As they came in, a huge shape emerged from the woods. The ork wore armour plating thick enough for a tank. It raised a huge, twin-linked gun. It moved with greater speed and precision than anything should beneath that much metal. It fired. The rounds weren't simple bullets. They were a meteor storm. Kyremun took the full impact of the volley. It smashed into him with such force it seemed that it might arrest his plunge. Instead, his descent became a tumble, shedding chunks of armour. Caeligus took several rounds to the shoulder. The brute mass of the projectiles sent him into a rapid spin. He was still spinning when he hit the ground on his back.

He was on his feet in an instant. Kyremun had landed in front of the giant ork. His helmet had been shot away, so had one of his legs, but he had his bolter out and was firing at the monster. His shells penetrated the armour, but did not slow the ork. Its left hand was a giant power claw. It clamped its grip around Kyremun's head and squeezed.

The wet snaps and cracks cut through the rumble of the war.

Kyremun's corpse fell backwards, blood flooding from the headless neck. Around the giant, a group of orks in welding masks trained flamers on the rest of Caeligus's squad. He hissed a curse for his own ears. He would not give the giant ork the satisfaction of seeing anything from him other than cold rage, and the arrival of merciless death.

He leaned forward and used a short burst from the jump pack. The angle was perfect. His flight took him straight at the ork's head. He shot over the huge plate beneath the ork's lower jaw. He stabbed down with his talons as he flew by. Adamantium punched through the top of the ork's skull and severed its brain in two.

His descent pulverised one of the flamer orks. The greenskin's reservoir burst, splashing burning promethium over its kin further back. Caeligus turned from the screams to face the armoured giant. It was still upright, still moving, still dangerous, but its actions were agonised and mindless. It stumbled in random directions. It flailed with its power claw. Convulsions pulled the trigger on its weapon. Bullets thudded into anything before it. Orks scrambled out of the way of its footsteps. Those not fast enough were trampled to death. Those in the way of its lunatic fire exploded when the bullets hit. The rounds were large enough to shatter ceramite. They turned flesh into mist.

The bulk of eldar survivors had reached the bridge. They were crossing now,

those on foot first.

‘We are done here,’ Caeligus voxed.

The Space Marines took off once more, dropping frag grenades behind them, giving the orks still more reason to fear the sky. Riding flame, they flew back across the gorge. The first of the eldar had reached the other side of the bridge. Squad Caeligus provided further covering fire, sending bolter shells into the orks that tried to follow. The lance turrets of the skimmers sterilised the approach to the bridge of greenskins. The horde bayed in frustration, but didn’t stop running forwards, firing all the while. They died. More came. More died. But the advance was relentless, the embodied violence always reaching forward, their bullets finding targets, and then another tank was smashing its way out of the trees.

The last of the jetbikes crossed the bridge. The first of the larger skimmers backed onto the span, still firing. As the second moved into position, it was struck by the tank’s cannon shell. The eldar vehicle exploded. The ruptured lance released a burst of energy that brought day to the battlefield and wiped out the leading cluster of orks. Its death bought the other skimmer the time it needed. It picked up speed, gaining distance from the orks.

The horde pursued. The greenskins ran through the burning wreckage. Some fell, covered in flames. The rest came on. The orks in the lead were a third of the way across when the skimmer reached the other side.

‘Now,’ Caeligus told Vaanis.

The Raven Guard detonated the melta bombs. They ate through the span. It took a few seconds longer than Caeligus had anticipated; the material of the bridge was stronger than it should have been. But then it surrendered, and the middle half fell into the gorge.

The orks had too much momentum to stop. They ran off the edge. More than a hundred orks plummeted before the rest managed to restrain their energy enough to slow down. Stymied, they roared their curses at the eldar and Raven Guard. Infantry and tanks kept firing. The shouts of the orks grew ever louder, as if their anger itself would close the distance between themselves and their prey.

Caeligus would not have been surprised if it had.

Krevaan stood at the melted edge of the bridge and looked into the depths of the gorge. Caeligus and Behrasi were beside him. The other sergeants were keeping the eldar under close watch. Battered as they had been, the eldar still boasted a small but extremely mobile force of two dozen jetbikes in addition to the large

skimmer.

The orks had abandoned the far side of the gorge. Krevaan knew they had not given up on Reclamation. They were seeking another road into the city. They would find it. They would have to travel many kilometres, but the land to the east was a gentle rise. The orks would have to be stopped before they entered the city, or Reclamation would die.

Krevaan watched the scene in the gorge carefully. ‘They *are* a resilient race,’ he said.

‘But this is ridiculous,’ Caeligus protested.

Improbable, certainly. Grotesque, very likely. Ridiculous, no. Krevaan held the orks in contempt, but they were not creatures of ridicule. To consider them as such was to underestimate them. Krevaan knew better than that. And the orks below were proof that they should be regarded as a very great threat. Many of them had survived the fall. Krevaan counted fifteen climbing back up the wall of the gorge.

‘That will have to be dealt with,’ he said.

‘Flamers?’ Behrasi suggested.

Krevaan nodded. ‘Yes. Burn them as they near the top. All of them.’

‘How are any of them still alive after that fall?’ Caeligus was outraged.

‘Chance?’ said Behrasi.

‘No. Look at them.’ Krevaan pointed. ‘The survivors are all large specimens. The strongest of these orks are unusually strong. And the pattern is consistent. We are not dealing with random mutations or lucky accident. There is an increase in power and aggression across the entire greenskin force on Lepidus. Given what we have seen, the surprise would have been if the strongest of the brutes had not survived this fall. It was only gravity, brothers. Did you expect to crush this foe with so simple a weapon?’

‘But what is making them so formidable?’ Behrasi asked.

‘*That* is the question.’ Krevaan started back towards the gathered forces.

‘Abnormal orks. Eldar fighting to the death to save a human city. Two phenomena with no clear explanation. Is it possible that that these two mysteries are not linked? Frankly, no.’

‘But why keep one of those mysteries alive?’ Caeligus asked.

Krevaan looked at both Caeligus and Behrasi before answering. He was sure that Caeligus knew better than his question suggested. The sergeant had a hunger for information that was laudable, but he was impatient, too. Krevaan wasn’t sure that, in his desire to know more, Caeligus had the wisdom to make proper

use of the knowledge he had. Behrasi was no less curious, but more patient. He was willing to suspend judgement. Caeligus wanted an immediate verdict.

And what of us? Krevaan wondered. *How do we gauge the worth of our own judgement?*

By asking the question, he thought. By being aware of the gaps in information. By watching for his blind spots.

The eldar force had suffered badly at the hands of the orks. Even so, it remained a power to be taken seriously. It was based on mobility and speed. Krevaan surmised that the few warriors on foot were ones whose vehicles had been destroyed. All the others were mounted on jetbikes, or the last turreted skimmer.

Vyper, he thought, reviewing his store of knowledge about the eldar. *They call it a Vyper. And these are the Saim-Hann.* Xenos soldiers obsessed with speed. It occurred to Krevaan that the presence of one of the White Scars might have been useful for the conversation he was about to have. He gave a mental shrug and tossed the idea away. It did him no good, and so was not worth his time.

He knew what he had to accomplish. The task was distasteful. It would involve a measure of trust. It would be provisional, minimal, and fragile. It would also be necessary.

He eyed the eldar as he approached. They were a race that embodied mystery, but not, he thought, because of their mastery of the shadows. He did not believe that their motivations were shrouded. They were, as far as he was able to tell, perverse. That fact did not warrant his respect. It did demand his caution.

On the other side of the gorge, there was no road to the bridge. There were barely any paths through the forest. On this side, though, paving travelled east from the bridge, becoming a wide square after the first cluster of buildings. It was more than enough space for both the eldar and Eighth Company. They faced each other across the square, eldar to the north, Raven Guard to the south. The weapons of both forces were at the ready, though not quite pointing at each other. The fiction was that it would take either group as much as a second to rain death on the other.

Krevaan walked to the middle of the square, then stopped. He folded his arms and waited. An eldar carrying what appeared to be a sniper rifle over his shoulder walked forward to meet him. The xenos wore a cloak that had some sort of active camouflage, and Krevaan found it difficult to track his movements. On instinct, he reached for the shadows around him. He noted their location, their density, how they linked to each other. The lumen globes of Reclamation's

streets were harsh, and the shadows they cast were edged like blades. He decided how best he would kill the eldar walking towards him. He felt the impulse to clench his fist and slash with his talons.

He held himself back.

The eldar stopped a few paces from him, and made a respectful nod. 'I am Alathannas,' he said.

'Do you lead?' Krevaan asked.

'No. I speak your language. Will you talk with me?' His accent in Gothic was odd. It seemed to slip from system to system, sector to sector. It was made of layers, and beneath them was a core that belonged to no human planet at all.

'I will listen to what you have to say.'

'That is well. We can work together. We must. I am glad you are here, human. I hoped for your arrival.'

Krevaan gave Alathannas a hard look. The eldar's face was unshadowed. It had the length and elegance typical of his race, and an openness that appeared to Krevaan to be unfeigned. It was a form of curiosity, an energetic inquisitiveness that was present even in the midst of war. Krevaan recognised and understood the hunger for knowledge that he saw in the eldar's eyes. But he also saw before him a being who was eager to experience the new. That was an impulse he distrusted.

Alathannas had stopped with a lumen globe shining directly onto him. He had thrown back the hood of his cloak. He was inviting Krevaan's scrutiny. He wanted the Shadow Captain's trust. That made Krevaan even more suspicious. 'Why would you hope that we would come?' he asked.

'We cannot stop the orks on our own. And they must be stopped. We must protect the city.'

Krevaan kept his surprise at the vehemence to himself. 'The city,' he said, 'is already well defended.' He lied to see how the eldar would respond.

'Not well enough,' Alathannas said. 'I believe we both know what route the orks are taking at this moment.'

Krevaan could see strain on his face. That was unusual. When he had served in the Deathwatch, Krevaan had had dealings with the eldar. Violent ones. He had needed to acquire a certain familiarity with the enemy, insofar as it was possible for any human to fathom their alien minds. Alathannas was on the verge of pleading.

We must protect the city. What did he mean by that? Was that the eldar mission on Lepidus? Why? It defied all logic. He did not ask why Reclamation was so

important to the Saim-Hann. He would have no faith in the veracity of the answer. He would have to find it himself. He would have to observe the eldar, and see how best to strike. In order to observe them, he would have to offer the simulacrum of trust.

‘The orks must be destroyed,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Alathannas said. ‘Above all things, yes.’

More strain. Desperation perhaps.

Krevaan nodded. ‘Then cooperation between our forces would be to our mutual advantage.’

Alathannas’s relief was as evident as his tension had been. Krevaan began to feel contempt for this warrior, along with suspicion. He was giving too much away. He should not be so easily read by an opponent. ‘You will liaise?’ Krevaan asked. He looked beyond Alathannas to the eldar host. One figure stood apart, its armour more ornate. *You*, Krevaan thought. *You are the commander.*

The warrior said something to Alathannas, and though Krevaan could not understand the words, he sensed that they were spoken for his benefit. The voice was female, and rich in authority.

Alathannas acknowledged the commander with a solemn nod. To Krevaan, he said, ‘I will be the bridge between our people.’

‘You understand that you are standing on Imperial soil?’

‘I do. We all do.’

The agreement was too quick in coming. *I see*, Krevaan thought. *You were passing by, noticed the orks invading an Imperial world, and decided to give your lives in an act of transcendent selflessness.* Alathannas was lying.

Krevaan added that fragment of information to his store. Then he said, ‘Then I believe cooperation is possible. Speak to your commander. We should discuss our next move.’

‘Did he believe you?’ Eleira asked when Alathannas returned. She removed her helmet.

‘He will work with us, autarch.’

‘That is an equivocation.’

‘I apologise. I don’t know whether he believed me or not. He has extraordinary self-discipline.’

‘For a mon-keigh.’

Alathannas bowed his head. ‘I used body language that should have been interpreted as great eagerness and a certain naïveté. If he thinks his judgement

superior to mine, I think he will trust me more. Or at least distrust me less. But I could not tell what he was thinking. I have failed in that regard.'

Eleira drummed her gauntleted fingers once against her armoured thigh. 'You have had much experience with the mon-keigh on your travels, ranger. I would have thought it useful at a time such as this.'

'I have never encountered a human like this one.'

'Then we are hardly better off.'

'With respect, autarch, we are still alive, capable of fighting, and the orks have not taken the city.'

'But now the forces of the mon-keigh are involved.'

'The city was always in their hands. What is different? With their help, we might be able to stop the orks.'

'That is not our only goal,' the autarch reminded him. 'You are far too sanguine about the human occupation. I wonder if you have been too long within their influence.'

It was difficult to remain upright beneath her gaze. Defiance was out of the question. Eleira's centuries were visible in the scars she had acquired in countless battles. Their lines, most faint, some fresh, made her face a tapestry of war, and accentuated the sharpness of her skull. Her age was most apparent, though, in her eyes. They had accumulated so much experience, so much pain, and so much anger, that they were the colour of cold metal. They had had all hope scoured from them.

Alathannas chose to think that this absence was an error. He had no illusions about humans. They were a race of violence and waste, one that could be trusted to act, with demoralising consistency, against its own interests. That self-destructive instinct would make them merely pathetic if it did not also have catastrophic results for the rest of the galaxy. Alathannas knew all this, but he had also encountered individual humans who shared his desire to hope. Small as those slivers of optimism were, they were no less real. The alliance he had just forged was of the moment, yes. It was driven by necessity, riven by mistrust. But it had already produced a tangible result. That was worth something.

He wished he could be certain what it was worth.

'If you think my judgement is flawed,' he said to the autarch, 'then disregard it. But please consider the fact that we are having this conversation. If these humans had not arrived, we would have failed in every aspect of our mission. We would be dead, and the orks would be in the city. How long would it be before what we fear came to pass? The effect on the orks is already great. It is

calling them. They—’

Eleira held up a hand, silencing him. ‘What do you take me for?’

‘I—’

‘Do you think I am unaware of our situation?’

‘No, autarch. I know that you are.’

‘Then spare me your lectures.’ She gestured to Passavan, who stood a few metres behind. The farseer left the side of his jetbike to join them. As far down the path of the seer as he had travelled, he was still young. There was still a healthy materiality to his frame and his flesh. ‘Your evaluation of our current path,’ Eleira said.

‘The skein is tangled with disaster.’

When Eleira turned to look at the farseer, her lips thin with displeasure, Alathannas saw how exhausted she was. ‘I could have told you that myself,’ she said to Passavan.

Passavan bowed his head. ‘I understand. I wish I could be more precise. But the path we are walking is so frayed, so crossed with conditions and divergence, that any outcome beyond the most immediate is impossible to divine.’

Eleira snorted. ‘I can divine that if we open fire on the force before us, we will be annihilated. You will have to do better. I need to know if this path has a chance of succeeding where it matters most.’

Passavan said, ‘There is a chance.’ He did not sound happy.

‘But?’

‘The route there is so reliant on elements beyond our control. There is very little we can do at this stage to be assured of its outcome. The alliance that lies before us is, however, the only path that has even a remote possibility of success.’

‘We will have to walk carefully, then.’

‘Yes. I will guide us as much as I can. But no matter how cautiously we tread...’

‘Yes,’ said Eleira. ‘That might not make any difference.’ She looked at the humans on the other side of the square. ‘Well. So much for choice, then.’ To Alathannas she said, ‘Do what you can to earn their trust. Without it, much more than our lives is forfeit.’



CHAPTER THREE

The task he had set himself was futile. Behrasi knew this. Even so, he tried to divine the reasons behind Krevaan's move.

Eighth Company was back at its original base in the land to the south of Reclamation. Behrasi stood outside the command tent, waiting for the Shadow Captain to finish speaking with the commanders of the other missions. Contact had been re-established with Temur Khan and the White Scars. This was a good sign.

Being outside the city, with the eldar inside, on the other hand, was less reassuring. The situation was also too bizarre for Behrasi to dismiss it as a disaster. They had not been forced out, after all. The departure had been Krevaan's decision. It was the most baffling one that Behrasi had ever known him to make. 'The orks have a long road to travel,' Krevaan had said, as the Raven Guard and the eldar discussed strategy. 'But they will come. We need a more detailed sense of the environs.'

The leader of the eldar had said something to Alathannas. 'The city must be protected,' he had translated.

And then Krevaan had said, 'We will leave it in your care.' The reaction among the other Raven Guard was one of acute discomfort. The move went against every instinct. It had also not gone over well with the authorities in Reclamation. Governor Kesmir had come to meet Eighth Company as it marched towards the southern exit from the city. He had been accompanied by Cardinal Reithner. The ecclesiarch had been apoplectic.

Krevaan had stood and listened to the duo's remonstrations for precisely one minute. At the sixty-first second, he had said, 'My decision is final.' Then he had resumed walking, and ignored the indignant squawks of the two mortals. They had howled, and the selfishness of their fears had been so clear that Behrasi had, for a moment, rejoiced in the fact that he and his brothers were leaving these two

bellowing non-combatants to what they believed to be their fates.

Now, though, his concern had returned with a vengeance. Around him, most of the other sergeants were pacing. Some spoke in groups of two or three. Others kept their thoughts to themselves. Caeligus moved between all of them, demanding answers that none could give. At last, he reached Behrasi's position.

'What is he thinking?' Caeligus said.

'You don't really expect me to know that.'

'Do you realise what we're risking?' Caeligus wasn't listening. 'How can we walk away from—'

'Brother,' Behrasi interrupted. He clamped a hand on Caeligus's shoulder, hard enough to jolt the other out of his rant. 'Yes. I am aware of the risk.'

'We have to do something.'

Behrasi hissed, 'What are you saying?' Now he was furious. Caeligus was one very small step away from outright mutiny.

The other sergeant seemed to realise this. He looked at Behrasi as if he hadn't been seeing him properly until this moment. 'Your pardon, brother,' he said. 'I don't know what I was saying.'

'Clearly not.'

Caeligus sighed. 'That was frustration and ignorance talking. Not me.'

'It was your voice.'

'Yes.' He paused, looking towards the lights of Reclamation. 'But why, in the name of the Emperor, would he have us leave the city?'

'The city is not the mission,' Behrasi said. He felt that he was on the edge of revelation.

'What?'

'The city is not our mission. It never was. Remember the larger goal, brother. The orks are our target, and even then in the service of luring the Overfiend. In that context, the city is unimportant. We could achieve our strategic ends even if the city were destroyed.'

'Maybe,' Caeligus admitted. 'But how is our greater purpose served by leaving the eldar in control?'

Behrasi had no answer. He knew he was right, though. He struggled to grasp the truth that hovered just at the limit of his reach.

Krevaan stepped out of the command tent. 'Please join me, brother-sergeants,' he said.

Inside, the taticarium table's hololith was showing the landscape to the east and north of Reclamation. 'The greenskins have been busy,' Krevaan said. 'So

have our allies. Vox contact has been restored. The White Scars have destroyed their manufactorum on the moon. They have also managed to kill a powerful ork psyker.'

'That is welcome news,' Sergeant Klijuun said.

'Not all of it is. The ork engineer escaped. Temur Khan believes that it has teleported to a planetside location.'

Caeligus said, 'I don't see how a single ork tech is of much concern.'

'This one is. You have paid attention to the tanks we have seen here?'

'They do seem bigger and more resilient,' Caeligus admitted. 'But they are not indestructible.'

'But do you know how the ork heavy armour has been arriving on Lepidus?' Krevaan asked. 'It was being teleported. Do you know what powered the teleporter? A device that turned dozens of captured eldar psykers into a massive battery.'

'An ork did that?' Behrasi was stunned.

'In cooperation with the witch, yes.'

'If the manufactorum is destroyed,' Caeligus said, 'surely the principal means by which this ork could trouble us are gone too.'

Krevaan gave him a sharp look. 'Do you speak from a position of knowledge, brother-sergeant?'

'No.' Caeligus looked defiant. 'I am basing my conclusion on what we do know.'

'What we know is that these orks are far more unpredictable, powerful and resourceful than we could have imagined. They had a Stompa on the moon. I, for one, would have been surprised by the sudden arrival of that war machine. Surprise is what we inflict on our enemies. I do not accept being subject to it.' He turned from Caeligus and addressed the sergeants as a group. 'We will assume that the greenskin engineer is here, and active in the ork campaign. Expect an increase in heavy armour.'

Caeligus looked like he was on the verge of saying something more. Behrasi willed him to silence. Caeligus seemed to read his mind. He closed his mouth.

Krevaan returned to the table. The hololith had a line running, tracing the circular route the ork army would have to take to get around the gorge. The greenskins had gone north from the fallen bridge. That meant dozens of kilometres before the land dropped enough for it to be possible to ford the river. After that, the orks would still have to travel far to the east as the north boundary of the city was a sharp escarpment. Even allowing for the faster speed of these

orks, it was unlikely that the shortest route would bring them close to besieging Reclamation before daylight.

‘This,’ Krevaan said, ‘is what the *expected* route of the greenskins would look like. It is not good enough. We cannot *expect* anything of these orks. If our intelligence is not first-hand, and based on direct observation, it is useless. So we will observe. Brother-sergeants, your squads will fan out from the eastern gate of Reclamation. Sergeant Behrasi, your squad will attempt to intercept on the likely route. The rest of you will spread out further to the north-east. When one squad makes contact, the rest will close in.’ He held his hand out, palm up, fingers splayed. He slowly made a fist. ‘In this way, we will crush the greenskins,’ he said.

‘What will the eldar be doing?’ Zobak asked.

‘Sending out scouting units as well, according to our agreement.’

‘Units,’ Behrasi repeated. ‘What about their main force?’

‘Remaining in the city. Protecting it.’

‘And what else will they be doing there?’ Caeligus demanded. His tone was accusatory.

You really can't help yourself, can you? Behrasi thought. Caeligus sometimes accused him of excessive caution. In moments like this, though, it was Caeligus who demonstrated excess. Behrasi took the example of the captain to heart. Action was based on information: the better the intelligence, the more devastating the attack. Behrasi sometimes wondered, as he did now, whether Caeligus's desire for information only extended to the point of confirming what he had already decided.

‘Your question is an excellent one, brother-sergeant,’ Krevaan said to Caeligus. His patience was more withering than his earlier sharp tone. ‘Which is why I will be observing them.’

Alathannas and Passavan walked a step behind Eleira. They were nearing the centre of the city. The human construction was becoming denser and more elaborate. The scale of the task ahead was increasing. So were its complexities. So were its risks.

‘They’ve changed so much,’ Eleira said. ‘I can see traces of what was once here, but our records will be useless.’

‘They were never going to be sufficient,’ Passavan pointed out. ‘This was a maiden world. The city was constructed, but never settled. As for what we seek...’

‘It wouldn’t be on the surface,’ Alathannas said.

‘Precisely. And all we know is what the surface once was.’

Eleira stopped in an intersection. She turned around slowly. ‘How do they live like this?’ she said. ‘What have they done?’

On three of the corners rose more of the human habitations. They were dark monuments of rockcrete. Their windows were like the firing apertures of fortifications. Faces appeared in some of them. They were suspicious, frightened, and furtive as rats. The people of Reclamation, believing themselves abandoned and invaded, sought strength in their prison-like homes. Relief sculptures of the double-headed eagle of the human Emperor dominated the façades. There were other figures, too, that Alathannas surmised also had some kind of religious significance. The overwhelming impression was of a race whose spirit was imprisoned by its manifestations of material power.

On the fourth corner was a place of worship. In its massive, glowering oppression, it was not different in kind from the habitation complexes, but merely in degree. It was worse. It was their inspiration. It was the enforcer. The eagle detached itself from the wall, became iron, and spread its wings over the portico. Humans, the ranger thought, spared no effort in celebrating what crushed them.

And yet there were individuals who encouraged him to hope. Over the decades of his travels, there were humans whom he felt he could call friends. Those connections, impossible in principle, were the shining fragments that shielded him from despair. He did not expect friendship from the Raven Guard. But he had to believe in the chance of honest cooperation. If that existed, these orks might be defeated. The alternative was so dreadful, it had to be denied.

Neither he, nor anyone else on this planet, could afford to believe in the most likely outcome of the war.

‘The changes are too great,’ Passavan said. ‘I cannot tell if the entrance we seek still exists. Perhaps it never did. We don’t know what happened to the Exodites who began the settlement. Their work was surely incomplete. If there were an entrance, the mon-keigh would have found it.’

Eleira started walking again, moving up the street past the church. She was looking closely at the foundations of the buildings, at the vanishing traces of the eldar city that had stood here, and been erased by the millennia without ever truly living. ‘The question of the entrance is irrelevant,’ she said. ‘That is not what we are seeking. We need a location, first. Farseer, you carry our hopes.’

‘I wish I could fulfil them.’ Passavan’s grief was profound.

‘You must.’

Passavan glanced at Alathannas as if looking for his support. ‘What you ask is beyond my reach.’

‘Merentallas and Elisath both know.’

‘And *only* they know. They have travelled the path of the seer much longer than I have. Their sight extends far beyond mine.’

‘If they are still alive,’ Alathannas said.

Eleira ignored him. ‘We are all being tasked with the impossible,’ she told the farseer.

Passavan looked back at the church. He frowned and stopped walking.

‘You think it might be under that?’ Alathannas asked. The irony would be disturbing.

‘No. I thought I saw...’ His eyes moved over the wings of the eagle. That seemed to satisfy him. ‘I’m wrong,’ he said and moved on.

Alathannas scrutinised the face of the church. He trusted Passavan’s skills. He also valued his own. He looked for movement, or an anomalous shadow. But no, the farseer was right. There was nothing there. He scanned for another minute before he was certain, then walked after the others. He stopped just as he caught up and looked again.

There was only the night, pooling around the doorways.

The night watched the eldar continue north away from the cathedral. Krevaan remained as motionless as the stones around him until the trio were almost out of sight. Then he spoke softly into his vox-bead. ‘What do you see?’

‘Several other small groups are roaming the streets.’ Techmarine Thaene had taken up a position on the roof of one of the tallest habs in the south-central zone of Reclamation. He and Krevaan had approached directly from Eighth Company’s encampment. There was a delicious edge to the challenge of going so deeply into the shadows that even the eldar could not see them. Thaene did not venture far into Reclamation, as Krevaan needed his eyes from the commanding heights of the tower. From there, the Techmarine had a view of the square where the eldar had established their base, and a good perspective on the central avenues.

Krevaan wanted to be closer. He had spotted Alathannas and his companions heading towards the cathedral. He had chosen his post in the recesses of the portico and waited. His Deathwatch years had left him with some knowledge of the eldar tongue. It was not enough for him to follow the conversation as the trio

paused in the intersection. He was able to pick up some fragments, though. They were searching for something. That much he gathered. He noticed the way the leader was examining the buildings as they left.

He asked Thaene, 'Are the groups on patrol?'

'No, Shadow Captain. I have used high magnification to look at the ones that passed the closest to my position. They appear to be very interested in the foundations of the buildings.'

'Thank you,' Krevaan said. He was grateful. Thaene's observations dovetailed with his own. There was a pattern now to the eldar behaviour. Why the foundations?

We must protect the city.

The foundations of Reclamation were older than what was built upon them.

Which city are you protecting? Krevaan wondered. Answers blossomed before him. They were dark ones, but they explained much. If an eldar city had once stood here, it made more sense that the Saim-Hann had been so desperate to preserve it.

More sense? No, that wasn't quite true. Less irrational? Yes, that was closer to the mark. He could understand the location having an importance to the xenos. But their willingness to lay down their lives for something that had long since been erased almost completely from the face of Lepidus was still not explained. Their search was not for traces of the city itself. They were looking for something contained within the city. Whatever this prize was, it was worth any sacrifice. And if eldar lives were less important than this goal, what of the humans who now lived here?

That answer was easy. They were less than nothing.

Krevaan felt no outrage. If Reclamation had to burn in order to defeat the orks, then it would burn. He would take no pleasure in such an event, though, and he would seek to avoid it. What was impermissible was that the eldar harm the subjects of the Emperor in the pursuit of their own ends. The treachery of their race was rising to the surface, as he had known it would.

Thaene must have reached some of the same conclusions. He voxed, 'Will we be attacking them?'

'Not until we have dealt with the orks. The eldar will still be useful in that endeavour. But we should make some preparations for afterwards. How populated is the camp?'

He waited while Thaene carried out more observations.

'Very few of the eldar remain. A skeleton guard.'

Either they were not expecting an attack, or they were arrogant in their estimation of their capacity to spot an enemy's approach. Krevaan was not surprised. The eldar seemed unable to grasp the ability of the Raven Guard to wraith-slip. They looked at the power armour, and saw only juggernauts. Good.

‘Any likely targets?’ he asked Thaene.

‘Many. The vehicles are on the outer perimeter of the camp.’

Of course. For rapid deployment. That would make his task easier.

Krevaan debated following Alathannas. He decided against it. As shadow-cloaked as he had been, both the ranger and the psyker had become aware of something. He would not tempt fate. The longer the eldar did not think that he was actively moving against them, the better. Their cooperation was still useful, and their actions would be more revealing if they believed themselves unobserved by any eyes that mattered. Better not to give them the chance of suspicion. Whatever they were seeking, they did not know where to find it.

‘Meet me at the tower base,’ he told Thaene. ‘Have the equipment ready.’

Krevaan made his way back to the Techmarine's position with the same care that he had used in reaching the cathedral. The eldar search parties were not in this sector, as far as he and Thaene knew. Krevaan assumed that they didn't know enough. He anticipated the enemy's gaze at every step. He factored in the chance looks of mortals at their windows. He was hidden, a massive shadow among shadows, a heavily armoured silence moving in on prey. No matter how circuitous his route, he would complete his hunt.

Dawn was still an hour away when he reached the hab-tower. The night pressed down on Reclamation with the full weight of the siege to come. Thaene stood against the façade, in the dark between two of the street's lumen globes. He was holding the melta bombs. Krevaan examined them. ‘Near the engines of the skimmers,’ he said.

‘That is correct, Shadow Captain. Inside would be best.’

‘But any location where they are unlikely to be discovered, at any rate. There is no chance of their being triggered accidentally?’

Thaene shook his head. ‘The detonators will not function unless they receive the signal that I send them.’

‘Good.’

He did ask himself, as the flow of shadows took him towards the eldar encampment, if there was any situation that would not result in his ordering Thaene to set off the bombs. He didn't think there was. If the eldar betrayed the Raven Guard during battle with the orks, he would kill them and their vehicles.

If they remained trustworthy to the end of the war, there was still the question of Reclamation. The eldar wanted something here. Victory against the orks would change nothing. The Saim-Hann would have to be expelled by force. This was the simple truth of the matter.

Krevaan found it interesting, all the same, that he even considered the question. The extermination of the xenos had been a given in the Deathwatch. He wondered why he engaged in this speculation at all.

Because you can, he thought. Because the orders come from you, not the Inquisition. He had the luxury of acting with the full knowledge of why the actions were called for, and what purpose they served. He was proud of his achievements, now over two centuries in the past, in the Deathwatch. He had been less enamoured of how the true purpose of the missions had often been shrouded from his vision. He understood the motivation behind the secrecy. He understood its utility. He had chafed at being subject to it. Now he made use of it. He wielded it as he would any other weapon.

He reached the square. Crouching in the darkness cast by the squat hab-block, he was only a few metres from the perimeter of eldar vehicles. He slowed his breathing and heartbeats. He became the thing that the eye passed over as it moved between points of interest. He watched the movements of the eldar.

They had patrols along the edge of the camp. There were few guards, but the timing of their circuits was complex. They didn't appear to move at a constant speed. It was difficult to predict when he would fall in a blind spot. The minutes to dawn fell away. He was patient, unhurried. There was time. He would not need long.

When the moment came, he was moving even before his conscious mind noted the opportunity. He crossed the open space, slipping between the overlapping gazes of the guards. He reached the vehicles, staying low and motionless before the Vyper. He waited for the next opportunity, then moved along the skimmer's nose and fixed a melta bomb to the underside of the fuselage, where it joined the short, angular wings.

Stillness again. Then a shift among shadows. A bomb attached beneath the engine of a jetbike. He repeated the pattern. He was never where the eldar looked. He was engaged in a duel that he would lose if his opponent ever realised that battle was engaged. He respected the eldar's perception.

And he thwarted it.

The operation took an hour. The sky was lightening as he headed back to meet Thaene. The tide of darkness was receding. It was still more than deep enough.

He did more than evade the eldar's sight. He smashed its power. When he rejoined the Techmarine, he completed an act of war that would not be known until he chose. The shadows had planted a gladius in the heart of the eldar. He had killed them. He would let them sustain their illusion of life only for as long as it suited him to do so.

As they headed back to Eighth Company's base, Thaene asked, 'Is there any chance we will not use what you have prepared?'

That question again. *No*, Krevaan started to say. He changed his mind. 'If the eldar prove trustworthy, you will not have to send that signal.'

'No chance, then,' Thaene said.

A thought crossed Krevaan's mind. It was close to being a doubt. Was he setting impossible conditions? Was it possible that he was acting dishonourably?

Before he could answer himself or the Techmarine, Caeligus's voice came over the vox. His tone was urgent. The background noise was chaotic.

Then it resolved into the roar of a gigantic engine. And that was much worse.



CHAPTER FOUR

Travelling in sustained bursts from the jump packs, Caeligus had led his battle-brothers on a wide sweep. They were the squad furthest out from the base, sent dozens of kilometres to the east of Reclamation. Reaching the reconnaissance point assigned, learning the details of the landscape but finding no enemy, Caeligus pushed north as hard as he could. He didn't expect to intercept the orks. He assumed that they would turn in towards Reclamation at the first opportunity.

He was frustrated by the position Krevaan had designated for his squad. His hope was to catch sight of the orks during one of the jumps. He accepted that he would not be among the first to engage, but he wanted his knowledge of the greenskins' position to be first-hand. It was a point of pride, not of necessity. He admitted this to himself. Though he said nothing to the others, their grim drive told him they felt the same. The engagement against the orks at the Reclamation bridge had been unsatisfying. It had felt too much like what it was: fighting in defence of the eldar. Now, though, the true war of extermination could begin.

He saw a light to the north. It was an intermittent glow.

'That can't be them,' Vaanis said. 'Why would the greenskins travel that far out of their road?'

'That isn't sunrise,' Caeligus said. 'And it isn't natural. So it's either the orks or the eldar.'

The squad had already travelled much further than Caeligus had anticipated. The glow was more distant yet. It made no sense that the orks had headed in that direction. *It therefore makes perfect sense, given these orks*, he thought. Even if he was wrong, ignoring this event would be a mistake. *Orks or eldar, I see enemy activity*. 'That is our destination,' he said.

'Should we report in?' Havran asked.

'When we have something definite to report,' Caeligus told him. Unlikely as it seemed, if the lights were the result of a freak planetary feature, he would risk

deviating the war effort from its proper course.

He would also risk humiliation.

They arced towards the light. With each flight, the glow sharpened. Caeligus began to distinguish individual beams. He could hear the sound of engines. Then they picked up the tracks of the ork passage. The terrain was chewed up in a swath. But not a wide one. The main body of the ork army had not come this way.

Caeligus swallowed his rage. A portion of the enemy was ahead. The activity had to be investigated.

The squad was still several minutes away from the ork position when a formation of eldar jetbikes flew towards the lights. Caeligus cursed.

A few leaps away, the scene ahead began to take form. It was no less confusing. There was a building that looked like a crude hangar. It was huge. It had been covered with earth, camouflaging it from any distant onlookers. A large party of orks surrounded it, their guns facing out.

The eldar were conducting hit-and-run attacks. The greenskins were laying down forbidding barrages of shells and bullets, but they had no tanks. One jetbike burned. The ork casualties were mounting quickly, though they had the resources to hold out for some time yet.

The squad came within range. Caeligus called a halt on a small hill just beyond the range of the orks' rifles. The brutes hadn't noticed them yet. They were focused on the eldar. The sounds of industry came from inside the hangar. There was also a heavy, continuous, beating roar. *An engine?* Caeligus wondered. If so, it was colossal.

The sky was shifting from black to grey. In the growing light, Caeligus realised just how blasted the land here was. The orks had been on Lepidus longer than anyone had thought. Long enough to have built this hangar. Caeligus thought, at first, that this was the point to which the greenskins had been teleporting their battlewagons from the moon. Then he realised that in that case, there would have been no reason for them to attack Reclamation from the west. This was something else, perhaps originally intended to provide reinforcements, thereby trapping the city in a pincer assault.

'The orks are looking outward,' he said. 'We will use that distraction.' He pointed. 'We land before the doors. We will destroy what the greenskins wish to protect.'

They made the jump. They came down hard, bolters already firing. The orks nearest the hangar doors died without knowing what was striking them. The next

ones spun in confusion. Half of Squad Caeligus tore into them, spreading an arc of death outward from the building. The orks' fire lost all coherence as they tried to respond to eldar and Space Marines at the same time. While Havran and his brothers waded into the enemy, Caeligus and the others provided cover for Vaanis as he set demolition charges on the doors. On the other side of the iron wall, the rumble and whine of the enormous engine intensified. The sound felt loud enough to shatter bone.

The details of the cacophony were hard to sort. Even so, Caeligus realised something had changed. The sounds of construction had ceased. They were replaced by a rhythm. It was slow at first, the heartbeat of a huge machine. Within seconds, it accelerated.

It was easily recognisable. It was also impossible. It was too big.

Vaanis turned his head to look back at Caeligus. 'Brother-sergeant...' he began. He knew. They all did.

'Move!' Caeligus roared.

The locomotive smashed through the hangar doors. The iron barrier disintegrated. Metal shards flew like sleet. Vaanis was smashed against the front. It bore the shape of immense clamped jaws, and the machine leapt forward with such speed that the impact held the Raven Guard's body against the lower fangs for a few seconds before he fell. Treads ten metres long crushed him, hundreds of tonnes of mass smashing ceramite like an eggshell, smearing his genhanced flesh across the ground.

Caeligus used an emergency burst from his jump pack to hurl himself up, back, and to the side. So did the rest of the squad. Reflexes and speed were not enough. Three others were knocked down by the juggernaut's charge. Brother Cyok rose above the height of the cab, only to come into the line of fire of the enormous gun mounted on the rear car. It fired. Cyok vanished. The shell lit up the dawn with a streak of flame. When it reached the ground, kilometres ahead, it struck with the force of a meteor.

The side of the engine clipped Caeligus. It knocked his flight out of true, and he slammed into the ground at a steep angle. He launched himself back into the air immediately, shaking off the stun in mid-flight. He landed fifty metres away, then turned to fight the new enemy.

The land train was a colossus. The locomotive alone was several times larger than the battleguards. It pulled four cars that were almost as huge. The lower half of each appeared to be troop compartments. The top half held turrets and rocket pods. Engine and cars bristled with so many guns, they looked like

clusters of spines on a living animal. Running on treads constructed of metal so thick that it seemed the cars were solid all the way through, the train should have advanced at a tectonic crawl. But its engine was so overpowered that the monster tore up the earth with the eagerness of a hunting saurian. The orks on the ground shouted their joy as their great machine was unleashed. Many of them did not move from its path in time. They were pulped in their turn. The celebration only grew more frenzied.

The train's sudden emergence placed it in the path of two of the eldar jetbikes. Their drivers tried to evade. They veered hard to the left and the right. They might as well have tried to avoid a moving mountain chain. The Saim-Hann worship of speed turned them into burnt offerings. The skimmers became fireballs as they collided with the monster.

On top of the locomotive, towards the front, was the clear blister of a canopy. In it, a single ork surveyed its works, and exulted.

'Raven Guard!' Caeligus called over the vox. 'Strike the engineer!' As he began his descent, he opened the company channel. 'The orks have a land train,' he warned. 'North-north-east of Reclamation.' He fired a long burst of shells at the canopy. 'The eldar...' he began, but trailed off when he saw the look on the ork's face. The brute was a big specimen, bent over by a giant, flashing collection of coils on its back. It looked up at the Raven Guard assault squad coming at it from all angles. Still twenty metres out, Caeligus could see the monster grinning.

Laughing.

The bolter shells left the canopy untouched. One second too late, Caeligus realised that they weren't even hitting it. There was a strange shimmer about the train. The shells were striking a force field. Then every gun on the train fired simultaneously. A curtain of projectiles cut through the squad. The bullet streams were unending. They defeated ceramite, battered and bled the Space Marines into bloody meat. The cannon fired again. All the cannons did. The train was surrounded by a storm of blasts.

The fire faded. So did Caeligus's retinal display. Havran was the last of his brothers to die. Caeligus saw him topple from the roof of the locomotive, both arms and his left leg shot away. Caeligus clung to the lower fangs of the engine's battering ram. There were large holes in his power armour. His jump pack was leaking promethium. If he tried to use it, he would immolate himself. Though he had lost his display, he knew he was suffering from massive internal bleeding.

He would rip the laughter from that ork's throat.

Strength fading, he tightened his grip on the iron fang and hauled himself upwards. He grabbed the upper teeth, found a foothold on the lower ones. Above that, there was a smooth expanse of metal. He paused, looking for any means to climb higher.

The jaws parted.

He lost his grip and fell forward. His chest hit the mouth of a stubby cannon almost as wide as the one on the rear car. He threw himself backwards as the gun roared.

The shell did not hit him directly. So he lived long enough to know what was happening to him. The damage was so great that it was beyond pain. His body was enveloped by a cold nothing. He flew in a broken cartwheel and landed a short distance ahead of the locomotive. He tried to rise. His body did not respond. He couldn't even blink. He lay on his back, his head twisted to the side. In the burning dawn, he watched the train rush towards him. Its shadow passed over him, returning him to night. Then came the treads.

And then, at the very end, there was room for more pain.

Behrasi heard Caeligus's final vox transmission. Then, as if summoned by the dawn, the rest of the ork army appeared over the north horizon. A few moments before, there had been silence. The cacophony of engines and war cries did not approach: it erupted.

'How did we not hear them before?' Brother Rhamm asked.

Squad Behrasi was on one of the few roads of Lepidus. It circled the hill of Reclamation in a wide ellipse, about five kilometres from its base to the north and south, twice that east and west. On the east side, it embraced most of the colony's cultivated land. The Raven Guard were midway between the point where the road turned south, and the branch that led to the city's east side. The terrain consisted of gentle hills. Further to the east was a web of deep gullies. The road was the easiest, most likely route for the orks to take. The surprise had been in the enemy's absence until now.

'They were waiting for the signal,' Behrasi said. The strategy was simple, it was effective, and it was another lesson in the danger of underestimating the orks. 'The army and the land train will reach Reclamation at the same time.'

Krevaan's voice came over the vox. He was speaking to the entire company, demanding news of Caeligus. Behrasi said, 'We've lost all contact. I have eyes on the ork army.'

'All forces converge on Squad Behrasi's location,' Krevaan ordered. After a

moment, he added, 'I will send you word about the eldar disposition shortly.'

'Will they be joining us?'

'It would be in their best interests to do so.' The comment could be taken a number of ways. Behrasi assumed that Krevaan meant them all.

He watched the rising clouds of dust and smoke that marked the ork approach. 'The greenskins will be here before reinforcements arrive,' he said.

'Slow them down,' Krevaan said. 'We must keep the two forces apart. Together, they will raze everything. We have a chance of defeating the separated foes.'

'Well,' Behrasi said to his battle-brothers when the Shadow Captain had signed off, 'shall we demonstrate how a single squad can stop an army in its tracks?'

A few hundred metres further on, the road passed between two rises. It was as close to a choke point as they would find.

'This is where we stop them,' Behrasi said.

'Will we?' Rhamm asked.

'I didn't say permanently. But long enough.'

Half the squad began laying mines. Behrasi took the other half forward. The single ambush would not be enough. Every impediment they could throw in the orks' way would make a difference. Each moment that the orks had to struggle to advance was a moment that brought the rest of Eighth Company closer to the engagement and interfered with the timing of the orks' assault.

The Raven Guard advanced on foot, at a run. They eschewed the use of the jump packs. They needed invisibility more than speed. Behrasi and Rhamm pounded along the west side of the road while the other three took the east. They would have time, Behrasi estimated, to cover perhaps a kilometre before they met the leading elements of the orks. That would be enough.

Going north, the hills became even lower. They were gradual swells giving way to prairie. There were no trees. The grass was less than calf-height. Day had come, and the sky was overcast. If Behrasi looked away from the approaching horde, if he blocked out the sound of savagery and war, he saw a mirage of peace. Other than Reclamation and its immediate surroundings, Lepidus was untouched. The roads, like the bridge, pre-existed human colonisation. They were almost completely unused by the colonists. The millennia had eroded them, just as they had toppled the city that had once stood in Reclamation's place. Though the edges were ragged with creeping growth, and there were cleavages where the ground had shifted in important ways, for the most part the pavement

ran straight and smooth. Behrasi did not recognise the materials of the road's construction, though he now had a very good guess as to their origin. Other than the roads and the city, the planet was a blank slate, a garden that tended to itself, waiting to be of use.

Lepidus was, he knew, beautiful. He did not feel it to be beautiful. He experienced it as an arena of war. The peace of the landscape would vanish, ground to muck by the machines of slaughter. And this bucolic gentleness was an irritant in its lack of cover.

An irritant, not an enemy. The land was open, and the light was bright. There were still shadows. Wherever the foe was not omniscient, the wraith-slip was possible. And the orks were far from omniscient.

Now the enemy was less than a kilometre away. The Raven Guard kept moving forward, but at a diagonal away from the road. The orks were in full flight. They were charging straight ahead, hungry for their appointment with battle. They were not interested in what was happening on the sides, in movements that were visible only in the corners of their eyes.

One by one, the warriors of Squad Behrasi went to ground. At staggered intervals, the Space Marines lay prone, shadows in the grass, bolter sights set on the road. Behrasi was the closest to the enemy. He took up his position with barely a hundred metres to go before the greenskins arrived.

The warbikes came first. Their drivers leaned forward in their seats, jaws wide as they drank in the exhilaration of speed. They snarled at each other as they raced to be the first to arrive at the celebration of violence. They were within arm's reach of each other. Behrasi opened fire.

He blew the head off the leading ork. Its bike turned into the path of others as it tumbled down the road, spreading metal and flame. The next ork in line turned too hard and lost control. The bike flipped, catapulting the driver with such force that the brute left a metres-long spread of skin and blood when it hit the pavement. As at the gorge, a chain reaction built up. Laughter at the misfortune of rivals turned into screams as the bikes piled into each other. A burning mass of jagged metal screeched along the pavement and stopped.

Behind it, drivers of other warbikes managed to slow down enough to veer off the road. There was no cliff to finish them off here. Some rode past the flames and then were back on the road, roaring back to full speed. But others hit the wrong bit of unevenness of terrain. At those speeds, that was enough to send more bikes to the ground, their drivers catapulted into the air. Some of the orks survived their falls.

The army's advance began to stumble.

No orks had survived the massacre at the gorge. The rest of the army had not known there was a lesson to learn. With grim amusement, Behrasi watched history repeat itself for the first minute of the ambush. But the terrain was wider here, the orks had room to manoeuvre, and the force was so much larger. It was too big to be stopped.

The rest of the bikes found their way around the obstacle. So did the buggies. The battlewagons came up the middle and drove straight through the wreckage, scattering it to either side. The infantry followed.

To the south, more bikes went down. And then Rhamm took out the driver of one of the buggies. It slewed violently. Instead of trying to regain control, its gunner opened fire. Bullets raked across more of its kin than the landscape. A tank disciplined the gunner by putting a shell into the buggy before the vehicle could crash. More drivers died, more vehicles collided with each other, and the tangle grew worse.

Less than a minute had elapsed.

Behrasi rose from his position and headed south. He ran parallel with the orks. They paid even less attention to the sides. All eyes were on the fire and riot ahead. The horde slowed again, bunched up, and spread out. The orks were close to overrunning the Raven Guard positions without even knowing it. Behrasi pulled further back. He wanted a few more strategic kills before he was dragged into the mire of the fight for survival.

He was level with one of the tanks. It had a double turret, a smaller cannon placed above a larger one, each rotating independently. Its gunners were riding in the open. The hatches were open. The target was ideal. The opportunity was there.

He looked ahead. The wreckage was being cleared again. There was only a few hundred metres before the orks reached the choke point.

'Brother Gheara, wait for the first tank. The rest of you, join the attack when it begins. Use of jump packs authorised.' He looked back at his battlewagon. *Now, he thought, you have my full attention.*

Still running, he shot the gunners. As the orks behind the tank turned in his direction, he used his jump pack to propel himself at the vehicle. He landed on the top turret. An ork popped out of its hatch. He impaled its throat with his lightning claws, and hauled the gurgling greenskin out with one arm. He tossed the ork over the side. It was trampled by its fellows. Behrasi dropped frag and krak grenades down the hatch. Then he shot away from the battlewagon on full

burst from the pack.

Below, the tank halted after the first muffled explosion. Both cannons aimed his way. Smoke was billowing from the hatches, but the greenskins were still determined to fire. The guns boomed. The shells shrieked past Behrasi at the same moment as the battlewagon blew up.

He came down at the choke point. The mines had torn the treads out from the leading tank. The orks were still trying to drive it. It lurched forward in jerks, spraying sparks as its metal wheels dug at the pavement. Two other buggies were upended and burning. Infantry was pouring into the space between the hills. Gheara and Paazur were on the battlewagon, fighting a dozen orks on the roof. Behrasi fired at the orks climbing up the sides of the tank. So did the other four members of the squad as they arrived. They bought Paazur enough time to haul open the hatch. He turned, aimed his flamer down and incinerated the interior.

The battlewagon stopped moving, a hulk of dead iron in the middle of the road.

Squad Behrasi kept shooting, piling up the bodies. The orks kept coming, faster and stronger. Gheara was in the clear, but before Paazur could leap from the tank, two massive orks surged from the crowd, faster and with more agility than should have been possible with their armour. They attacked Paazur from both sides, one with a chainaxe, the other with a power claw. The blows were the crack of thunder.

Paazur fell to his knees. One ork jammed the chainaxe into his gorget, grinding through until Paazur's head hung down his left shoulder. The other greenskin, unwilling to be left out of the kill, slammed its claw against his back. Its aim was off and it burst the flamer tanks. Howling, coated in liquid fire, the orks jumped from the battlewagon, spreading flame in the horde below.

The tide rose up both sides of the choke point. Two more tanks were coming up behind. The Raven Guard had created a dam, but Behrasi knew it was about to burst. How long had they held the orks back?

The battle had lasted a few minutes. It was almost over.

The squad regrouped. The Space Marines formed a line across the road. They walked backwards, away from the wreck of the battlewagon, and poured bolter shells into the horde. They killed orks by the score. Orks by the hundreds replaced them. The retaliatory fire became more organised, more concentrated, more lethal.

'Brothers,' Behrasi voxed to the company, 'I hope you are close. We have held the enemy back for as long as we can.'

‘We are almost with you,’ Sergeant Klijuun responded.

‘I see them,’ Gheara said.

Behrasi risked a glance backwards. He saw the streaks of seven more assault squads closing in.

In the same moment that he saw the hope of reinforcements, he heard the train. Heavy, thudding, sending the vibrations of its might spreading through the ground for thousands of metres in all directions, the orkish madness for speed and strength given material form appeared in the east.

Too soon, Behrasi thought. *Too fast*.

The train’s horn blasted across the land. Violence itself had a voice, and it rejoiced.



CHAPTER FIVE

The autarch and Alathannas arrived in the field just outside the Raven Guard encampment within minutes of Krevaan's return. The two eldar rode their jetbikes to within a few metres of where the Thunderhawk *Claw of Deliverance* was preparing for lift-off. Krevaan was aboard with his squad. He ordered the pilot, Radost, to wait. He pulled open the side door, jumped to the ground, and strode over to the two xenos.

'You know of the land train,' Alathannas said.

'It destroyed ten of my warriors.'

'And many of ours. Autarch Eleira believes our strategies should be closely coordinated. We cannot confront the orks in a direct contest.'

Admitting the orks' numerical and armour superiority to anyone other than his battle-brothers went against Krevaan's every instinct of honour and pride. Denying the truth of the assessment, however, would be madness. There was no time for grandstanding. And he had never had patience for commanders unwilling to face reality. 'I agree,' he said, looking directly at Eleira.

She acknowledged him with a formal nod.

Alathannas began, 'If the land train joins the main army...'

'We are aware of the danger,' Krevaan interrupted. 'We are fighting to keep them apart.'

Eleira said something to the ranger. Alathannas translated, 'With respect, force may not be sufficient.'

That, too, was true. 'What alternative do you propose?'

'We must make the orks choose to take separate paths.'

'I approve of the goal. You would need to offer them something very tempting for that to work.'

'The autarch proposes that we offer ourselves. All the eldar on this planet will ride before the army, drawing it off before the land train arrives.'

Krevaan was impressed by the daring and the selflessness of the move. The sacrifice the eldar were willing to offer was great.

It was one that would make no sense if there wasn't something more important to the eldar than any of their lives on this planet. In the city.

For Krevaan, the conversation took on the aspect of a duel. He and the eldar were using verbal camouflage as they sought to outflank each other. Every word spoken was true, and every word spoken was beside the point. The eldar needed the orks destroyed so they could find their true target. Krevaan had come to rid the planet of the orks, but to the larger game of luring the Overfiend to the system was added the necessity of uncovering the eldar game.

'Your plan does you great honour,' Krevaan said. And he too, was speaking the truth, even while he thought how profoundly he distrusted the eldar motives for undertaking this action. 'Should you succeed, have you considered how to survive that pursuit?'

'Speed has always been our weapon. If the orks look to our annihilation, rather than to besiege the city, we will have greater scope for action,' Alathannas said.

Krevaan visualised the territory. 'There are gullies to the east,' he said. 'If they follow you there, their mobility will be compromised.'

Alathannas translated for the autarch. She inclined her head again. The ranger said, 'We thank you for the information. You will mount an assault on the train?'

'Yes. It will not reach the city.'

'Then we wish you victory.'

The sentiment sounded heartfelt. It was difficult to read what move in the duel it concealed. Krevaan wondered if the ranger had his leader's full confidence. Having him speak made Eleira's strategy even harder to divine, especially if Alathannas believed what he was saying. Yet the autarch was not wearing her helmet. She was looking at Krevaan with a clear gaze, and an expression that spoke of the respect of one veteran warrior for another. She spoke now, her Gothic laboured but correct. 'Your alliance is an honour,' she said.

'As is yours,' Krevaan said. He had expected to grind his teeth. Instead, the words came easily. They were true without qualification, without subterfuge. The skill of the Saim-Hann was ferocious. Krevaan knew this from having fought them in the past. As formidable as these xenos warriors were, they were as badly overmatched as they had been the night before. The orks were stronger, more numerous and better equipped than either eldar or Space Marines had expected. What Eleira planned verged on martyrdom.

The eldar departed, bikes streaking over the morning field of a paradise tipped

into war. Krevaan returned to the *Claw of Deliverance*. As the gunship took off, he looked out of a viewing block. He followed the track of the two warriors as they joined the larger stream of skimmers. They flowed out of Reclamation to hook up with the patrols that would now be converging on the orks. Krevaan appreciated the art that he saw. He understood the elegance of the perfectly executed attack. Whether it came from the shadows or the wind, the enemy did not see the blow coming until it was too late.

Just as the eldar would not see his blade until it was deep in their flesh.

He thought about the melta bombs planted on the skimmers, awaiting his will. He looked across the troop compartment at Thaene. The Techmarine's face was expressionless. Much of his flesh had given way to machinic replacement. His eyes were black crystal lenses. His lips were a grille that was a mirror of his helmet's. The larynx through which he spoke delivered his words in a flat monotone. The cock of his head was expressive, though. *He can see my doubts*, Krevaan thought.

'What do the eldar intend?' Thaene asked.

'To fight a heroic, and perhaps doomed, battle.'

'Their plan is much like ours, then.'

Was Thaene capable of humour? That was a mystery Krevaan had tried and failed to pierce several times in the past. He decided to take the words at face value. 'Quite,' he said. They had no real intelligence on the land train beyond Caeligus's aborted vox transmission. But the obliteration of the squad told an important story. All ten of the Raven Guard gone in seconds. The rest of Eighth Company would be up against a weapon that was the equal, at least, of the entire greenskin army.

Thaene was still watching him. 'A question, Shadow Captain?'

'Go ahead, brother.'

'Do you believe we were in error in our judgement of the eldar?'

Having his doubts spoken aloud gave them added force. 'We were wise to prepare for the worst eventuality,' he said, knowing that that was not what Thaene had asked. The Techmarine said nothing in response. He remained motionless, impassive, while Krevaan examined his own reasoning.

He did not trust the eldar. No human should. And after the orks were crushed, the eldar would have to leave Lepidus, or be exterminated in turn. These facts were givens. There could be no tolerance of xenos presence on an Imperial world. Krevaan, though, had acted on a presumption of hostilities.

Why did you plant the bombs?

Because eldar have a deeper agenda.

One that you know to be inimical to Imperium?

If it is for xenos ends, it is inimical.

That truth wasn't enough. It was a principle so universal, it might as well have been background radiation. It did not speak to his personal decision.

Krevaan looked deeper. It was his responsibility as captain to know the source of his commands. That was intelligence at least as vital as understanding the enemy. He found himself turning to his experiences in the Deathwatch. Mission after mission, decade after decade of xenos extermination. The reflex to plan the violent end of the eldar on Lepidus was as natural as breathing.

And what of honour?

That mattered too.

What if the eldar are truly acting in good faith?

Doubts on that side too. But the possibility was there. He could not deny the reality of what they were attempting in the battlefield.

He looked up at Thaene. 'Brother Techmarine,' he said, 'you asked, earlier, if there was any chance we would not use the bombs.'

'You have decided that there is, Shadow Captain?'

Krevaan nodded. 'We will give the eldar the opportunity to prove themselves. If they act honourably, they will be allowed to depart the planet without harm.'

Thaene looked out through the viewing block on his side of the compartment. 'I can see the greenskins,' he said. 'Their force is colossal. They may not grant the eldar the chance that you offer.'

'It would,' Krevaan said, 'be in our best interests that they do.'

Radost's voice sounded from the vox-speakers. 'Land train in sight.'

Krevaan rose, opened the forward door, and climbed the ladder into the cockpit. He looked ahead. He saw the train. It was the antithesis of the Raven Guard way of war. It was monstrous. It was snake and mountain chain. It was machinery that had become the brutality of strength itself.

The train rumbled across the plain, gouging a long wound over the landscape. Its current position was just to the south of the higher, rockier, gully-riven terrain. A few kilometres to the north-west, the ork army fought the squads of Eighth Company. The formation of eldar skimmers was moments away from joining the fight.

'All squads,' Krevaan voxed, 'leave the orks to the eldar. Converge on the train.'

'What do you suppose will kill that thing?' Radost asked.

‘The same things that will kill anything else,’ Krevaan said. ‘Shadows and knowledge, brother. Shadows and knowledge.’

The Space Marines left the field as the Saim-Hann closed in. Their jump packs took them away in steep climbs. Alathannas saw what looked like a flight of black, iron birds shooting upwards. They were harsh silhouettes, fire and darkness cutting wounds against the sky. The humans lacked grace in their methods of combat, he thought. But there was a cold, merciless precision at work. To be dismissive of it would be to fall to it.

The orks were convinced of the Raven Guard threat. The army was having to advance through hundreds of its dead. Two- and four-wheeled vehicles smouldered, almost all of them killed in the middle of the road, where they would most hamper the orks’ forward march. The horde had spilled up the slopes on either side of the road, and more of them had died there. The Raven Guard’s kills had eaten into the coherence of the ork army. It still advanced, but more slowly. Eddies of confusion slowed it down. The orks were striking out in all directions, and were unable to find a concentrated foe. Instead, they had been struck again and again by single warriors and small hit teams.

The orks had drawn their own blood. Alathannas saw, scattered over the hills and on the road, the giant bodies of the Space Marines. Their armour had been shattered by massive projectiles and repeated explosive attacks. Orks were still raining blows on the corpses. The green tide bellowed in triumph as its foe departed, and raged in frustration that its prey was slipping from its grasp. The orks sent a storm of ordnance into the skies. As if governed by a single thought, they all turned their eyes upwards. They were so intent on bringing down the giant humans that they paid no attention to the ground.

They don’t see us, Alathannas thought. He rode just behind the autarch. Behind his helmet, he grinned for the first time in days.

The Saim-Hann slashed into the orks’ front lines. Eleira led them in a narrow wedge. The jetbikes’ catapults launched their monomolecular discs into the horde. The shuriken sliced through muscle and bone, dismembered and disembowelled. They blinded, and they opened throats, and they even cut through weapons. Some orks found their prize possessions coming apart in their hands. Others tried to fire the damaged gear, and lost hands or lives as the guns blew up. The jetbikes carved their way through the orks until Eleira signalled a turn and led the squadron out of their midst towards the south. She hesitated briefly at the first gully.

Alathannas looked back. The orks had given up on the Raven Guard. They were now sending all their wrath towards the eldar. Their fire was indiscriminate, inaccurate and plentiful. Rounds chewed up the nearby ground. One hit the cowl of his jetbike. The orks did not pursue. Though distracted, they were still moving down the road, towards the junction that would take them to the city.

And the boon that would make them unstoppable.

Eleira turned to Passavan. 'The strategy will work,' the farseer said. 'For good or ill.'

'For both,' Eleira shot back. Then she was riding again, leading them all again, a crimson spear aimed at the orkish heart.

They could not pierce that heart. Alathannas knew that. The body of the horde was too strong, too resilient in numbers. Even so, the satisfaction of retaliation was visceral. The retreat at the bridge had been a profound humiliation. Now the orks were learning the cost of that affront.

He was grinning again as the bikes hit the orks for a second time. The rush of speed was even greater inside the green tide. He was surrounded by fragmentary images of ork faces. They raged, they screamed, and they bled and died. He saw a blur of green, of clawed fists turning blades and guns his way. They were so slow, they appeared frozen.

The orks' sluggishness was an illusion. A dangerous one. It encouraged recklessness. It bred disaster. Eleira knew this. She guided her warriors back out once more, before the orks could arrest their flight. But Alathannas still heard the crunch of a high-velocity impact, the singing wrench of disintegrating wraithbone. The cry of a rider who was not killed on the instant, and instead fell to the butchery of the orks.

A battlewagon pushed past the wreckage of one of its kin. It surged forwards, cannon and side guns blazing. A shell burned through the air over Alathannas's head. It struck a jetbike three back from him. The explosion took out the skimmer, its rider, and the orks in immediate proximity. Earth, flesh and wreckage rained back down.

Bringing up the rear of the eldar formation was the sole remaining Vyper. Its gunner, Selandria, turned the bright lance against the tank. Its beam scorched the armour, shearing right through the thinner plating of the shutters. It cut the side gunners in half.

The cannon swung at the Vyper. Selandria trained the beam on the barrel of the gun. The battlewagon fired as the skimmer passed close. Warped by the lance,

the cannon burst apart. Selandria staggered as shrapnel bit into her armour.

The battlewagon was bereft of weapons except its very mass. The maniacal frustration of its driver was audible well beyond the tank itself. As the Vyper veered away from the tank, following the jetbikes, the battlewagon gave chase. It broke out of the greater mass of the army, and headed out across the plain after the eldar.

The other orks on vehicles did the same. Most of the bikes and buggies in the front half of the ork advance had been destroyed by the Raven Guard. But another wave had been riding escort to the rearward tanks, and its vehicles now roared free of the choke point. Blue and black smoke choked the air. The drivers pursued the Saim-Hann with total disregard of common sense. Rough terrain or smooth made little difference to the skimmers. The jetbikes flew above the uneven ground. The orks came at such speed that they caught up to the eldar. For a few orks, that was all that they did. Their bikes hit rock outcroppings. The drivers lost control. The vehicles went into violent rolls.

Still the bikes kept coming. The more stable buggies weren't far behind. Sprays of bullets covered the eldar formation. They began to take their toll. Two more riders were killed. The last of the enemy force passed through the choke point, unleashing still more vehicles. The final two battlewagons joined in the hunt. So did the infantry.

The orks had taken the bait.

The Saim-Hann raced to the gullies. The formation broke up. A handful of bikes dropped down each slope. They spread out over the terrain. They were no longer a coherent force. Having enticed the orks, the eldar denied them a concentrated group of targets. The green tide had numbers enough to cover the entire area. The orks poured into the maze of narrow streams and high cliffs.

The duel began.



CHAPTER SIX

The *Claw of Deliverance* went in for a strafing run along the length of the land train. The armoured beast grew before Krevaan's gaze. The locomotive and four cars resembled a mechanical being with its own volition. It was gargoyle, snake and battering ram. The crude, leering face at the front was, he suspected, a product of whatever passed for worship for the greenskins. The behemoth was constructed in tribute to their false god, and it was so powerful that it approached the monstrous divine.

The Thunderhawk launched a full barrage at the locomotive. Primary cannon, twin-linked heavy bolters, lascannons and Hellstrike missiles: an inferno enveloped the engine. The train didn't even slow. It drove through the explosions, and Krevaan thought its face bore a mocking snarl. He could see some minor scarring on the roof plating of the cars, but the locomotive showed no damage at all. At the very least, the clear blister beneath the great turret should have been shattered, its occupant reduced to ash. Instead the engineer appeared to wave, as if amused by the Raven Guard's attempts to do it harm. Then it retaliated.

The big gun rose and swung towards the gunship. The movement was slow. Radost evaded it easily. The other, smaller guns were a different story. The entire length of the train erupted in projectile fire. The armament was beyond excessive. It was as if the engineer had been possessed by an inspiration that had turned into madness. Guns that blurred the line between stubber and cannon were present every few metres along both sides of the roofs of the engine and the cars. The simultaneity of the fire meant that the engineer was controlling all of them. Shutters opened up in the flanks, and the ork troops aboard started shooting too.

Radost took the Thunderhawk into a steep climb. The wall of ordnance slammed against its armour. A few of the rounds penetrated, though the damage

was minimal. The main cannon fired. The shot went wide, but the size of the shell hit home for Krevaan. That was an artillery piece. The shell arced into the sky. Its descent was hidden. The orks, he realised, could start bombarding Reclamation whenever the spirit moved them.

The orks wanted the city as badly as the eldar did. They both had to be denied.

‘Shadow Captain,’ Zobak voxed, ‘we are in position to attempt to board.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Approaching the rear car.’

Radost brought the gunship around. He began dropping towards the train once more. The squads had all been kept at bay by the massive firepower, but Krevaan saw Zobak’s squad arrowing down towards their target. ‘We’ll draw the fire,’ Krevaan said.

Radost nodded that he’d understood. He raced the assault squad. The Thunderhawk screamed across the locomotive’s front at maximum velocity. The ork guns sought it out again. The range of the train’s field of fire was impressive. The engineer could shoot at whatever it saw. The *Claw of Deliverance* passed close enough for Krevaan to see the massive grin on the ork’s face.

The guns tracked, the beat of their fire a *chud-chud-chud-chud-chud* that shook the land. More rounds struck the gunship. He heard the crash and shatter of damage. He saw Radost struggle with controls becoming sluggish. The gunship’s weapons struck at the train again, and again the ork machine shrugged them off.

The *Claw* shot up and away from the train. Krevaan looked down to see if they had held the ork’s attention long enough to give Zobak the chance he needed.

They had not.

He saw the final moments of another slaughter. The train’s guns were not slaved to each other. They were capable of firing at independent targets. While the locomotive’s armaments had hit the Thunderhawk, the ones on the cars had responded to Zobak’s attempted incursion. The blizzard of fire killed his squad. Of the ten warriors, only one managed to land on the roof.

‘Take us to the rear,’ Krevaan told Radost.

The pilot kept the gunship high until he was level with the last car and began the descent. Krevaan called the sergeant’s name over the vox. Zobak answered with a croak. It was he who stood on the roof. As the gunship drew nearer, Krevaan increased the magnification of his helmet lenses. He looked at his sergeant. Zobak was stooped, his armour ruined in a dozen places. He took one heavy step.

A hatch opened in the centre of the roof and an ork climbed out. It rushed at the Space Marine, brandishing a cleaver the size of its arm. Zobak did not move. The ork stepped up to him and swung the cleaver back with both hands. Zobak shot out his arm, ramming his lightning claws into the ork's brain. The ork sagged on the spikes. Its weight dragged Zobak's arm down. He almost dropped to his knees. He pulled his arm away, freeing it of the ork. He stumbled back, but remained upright.

He walked forward another step.

Two more orks had emerged from the hatch. They carried huge shotguns. They shot him as they walked towards him. The rounds must have been solid slugs. The impacts were massive. Zobak jerked with each hit. The orks fired, reloaded, fired again.

Krevaan watched the blows batter the sergeant to death. The vision through his lenses grew in detail and pain as the Thunderhawk plunged towards the roof of the train in a desperate dive.

A useless dive, Krevaan thought. Did he imagine there was any aid they could bring to Zobak? What did he think would happen when the *Claw of Deliverance* came close to the land train once more? He killed the magnification. 'Pull up,' he told Radost.

The pilot must have been expecting the order. He responded as if he had been about to make the course correction himself at that moment. Below, the diminished figure of Zobak fell from the train. He was crushed beneath the treads of the cars.

Radost asked, 'We do have to board it, don't we?'

Krevaan nodded. 'Our weapons aren't enough to get through that force field.'

'How can it be so powerful?'

'For the same reason that all these greenskins are exaggerated exemplars of their kind. There is something on this planet, brother, that is driving them to obscene accomplishments.' *The eldar know what it is*, he thought. There would be no use in asking Alathannas the nature of the secret. It was something important to the eldar. It would have to be discovered by other means.

The Thunderhawk was moving west, tracking the train's progress. Krevaan looked to the north. From this height, it seemed that the eldar had lured the orks into cracks in the land. Both armies had vanished. It occurred to Krevaan that this invisibility might give the Saim-Hann dangerous opportunities.

He contacted Behrasi. 'Brother-sergeant,' he said, 'I have a task for you that I don't think you will welcome.'

‘I welcome my duty in whatever form it takes, Shadow Captain,’ Behrasi answered.

‘You have fought well from the shadows, and justified my faith in you. I need you to act as observer for the moment.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Track the progress of the eldar campaign.’

‘Are we providing assistance?’

‘No. Surveillance only. Keep me informed of its success or failure. More particularly, watch for any behaviour that is not about killing greenskins.’

‘We are tasked with watching our eldar allies,’ Behrasi said to Rhamm.

‘That’s all?’

‘For now.’ He looked towards the lowlands of the gullies. The ground to the west levelled off, becoming dryer and cracked by jagged cleavages. There must once have been aggressive streams carving out such deep beds. They were long gone, leaving behind a maze of rock. There was no way of monitoring the entire network of crevasses, though that wouldn’t be necessary. The struggle itself would be a guide.

He addressed the full squad. ‘We’ll have to spread out,’ he said. ‘Cover as much ground as you can. If the eldar are any sort of tacticians, they’ll be leading the greenskins into multiple gullies. Stay with the larger struggles. Relay what you see.’

They moved out onto the broken terrain. The gullies were a sudden drop in the dry plain extending east and north. They were narrow and very deep, easily twenty or thirty metres and more. Behrasi thought their depth and the complexity of the network was a bit too remarkable to be entirely natural. From the position of the squad as it moved from the south-west corner of the system, the interconnections resembled the radiating pattern of a spider’s web. It was too artistic. In this, it was in keeping with what he had seen of the planet’s geology. It was too precise, too pleasing to the eye. The quick shifts from one region to another felt like an arrangement rather than the lucky chance of natural processes. He wondered again about the eldar interest in the world.

Perhaps Krevaan’s suspicions were justified. And yet he felt uneasy in his task as he took up a position at the edge of a gully that pointed straight as a clawed finger. Partway down, he saw a large skirmish. The eldar were fighting hard. They had fought honourably, and their actions, as far as he had seen, had been the same. They were keeping faith with the agreement.

We are the ones who are not, he thought.

He lowered himself amid the rocks at the top of the cleft. He found shadow, and made himself part of it. He stood with perfect stillness. He waited, and watched, and wished he was boarding the train. He would have preferred the honest directness of that action. What bothered him was not quite that the Raven Guard might be betraying a xenos race. This was not about being more accepting of species whose existence was an affront to the sight of the Emperor. It was about being true to what the Raven Guard should be. They fought from the shadows. They became shadows. That did not mean becoming infected by shadow.

We are not the Night Lords.

He hoped that when he was next called upon to act, he would be confident that he did so with honour.

Alathannas was alone again. He had been in a squadron of four other jetbikes, but had split off from them at a Y-junction of gullies. He had sensed opportunity down the left-hand one. It was extremely narrow. It looked like a cleft made in the bedrock by a giant axe blade. Its course was a series of switchbacks. He was mad to take it at this speed. He hoped the orks were proud enough and foolish enough to follow him.

They were.

Four bikes followed him. The excited hoots of their riders echoed up the rock walls.

So, Alathannas thought, *we find common ground in madness.*

He flew even faster. He skimmed over the broken bottom of the gully. He was surprised the orks were able to maintain control of their vehicles over such a surface. The air rushed hard against his skin. A cliff face loomed ahead of him. He waited until the last second to throw his jetbike into a hard left turn. The wall came at him so quickly, and was so close, the wind itself seemed to turn into stone. The jetbike screamed. Momentum wanted him to wreck himself against the stone. Instead, he shot away and rounded the next corner.

He looked back as he took the turn. The leader ork drove straight into the cliff without even trying to turn. The bike exploded. Flames washed back over the other two. They managed to stay upright even as they had to make a ninety-degree course correction. Alathannas left them behind for the few moments it took them to reach the turn. They came around it firing. The bullets shrieked past him. He pulled ahead, the jetbike flying over the land with grace while the ork

vehicles gouged the earth. They pursued him with power and brute aggression. That would be enough to keep them in the race, but no more. If he wanted, he could lose the ork bikes.

He wanted them to follow. He wanted the orks certain that his fall was imminent.

There was still a hundred metres before the next sharp turn. He risked a glance back. The orks were falling too far behind. He slowed down a fraction. Just enough to give them the illusion of closing. Then he was at the turn.

The orks wouldn't fall for the same gambit again. Even they would slow down enough to negotiate the turn. That gained him another couple of seconds. He looked ahead, saw that the next switchback was barely thirty metres distant. He accelerated, flew hard right at full speed. Now there was another long, narrow stretch before the cleft in the rock closed entirely fifty metres on. He was in a dead end.

He saw all this, and the moves open to him, in a fraction of a second. For all his time as a ranger, for all the distance that existed between him and the greater community of his fellows, at this moment, he was one with them. He was living at the speed of the Saim-Hann. The world was a blur, the past non-existent, the future compressed into a present of lightning decisions and consequences. Battle was the wind against him, the wind created by his own velocity. The experience was more profound than exhilaration. It was the expression of the deep truth of his being. It was a summation.

The orks thought they could use speed against the Saim-Hann. He would prove them wrong.

He turned the jetbike around and rose a few metres higher above the ground. He flew back the way he had come. He lowered the aim of his shuriken catapults. The orks came around the corner at the same time that he did. He fired down, strafing the riders as they passed beneath him. The shuriken severed the right arm of the lead pilot. His bike jerked left and started flipping. The others couldn't avoid it. They drove into a collision.

Alathannas's lip curled. The orks were becoming very good at killing each other through their own love of speed.

Alathannas left the orks behind. He returned to the junction and made his way through the maze of connections towards the sounds of war. He shot through a passage so narrow that the walls brushed the wings of the jetbike. He came out in one of the larger gullies. It was wide and long. The orks used the greater room to their advantage. They filled the space with their strength. Infantry and bikes

were here in numbers. There was also a battlewagon. It struggled to find traction in the soft earth of the former riverbed. It advanced in irregular lurches. That was dangerous enough. The combined ork forces filled the gully with a torrent of fire.

It worked. No amount of speed or manoeuvrability could escape that storm. As he entered the gully behind the orks, Alathannas saw an entire squadron of jetbikes smashed and blown apart by bullet and shell.

Three jetbikes still flew, jinking hard, flying straight at the orks in a desperate attempt to punch a hole in their fire. The excited laughter of the orks rose over the hammering roar of their attack.

Alathannas flew down the centre of the gully. He passed over the orks' heads, once more firing down on them, drawing part of their attention away from the other attackers. Some of the orks assumed he was not alone, and retaliated against phantom enemies to the rear. The confusion was the edge the attacking eldar needed. They lost another jetbike, but they also cut a swath deep into the ork infantry and took out two riders. The tank advanced unharmed.

Alathannas joined the other two. One was a Fire Dragon named Kuthalen. The other was the autarch. Eleira reversed direction and led them away from the enemy. The remaining bikes ran over their own foot soldiers in their eagerness to give chase. One collided with a walker, destroying both. The rest of the orks advanced at the pace of their tank.

The gully had a gradual curve to the right. The jetbikes moved beyond the line of sight of all but the bikes. Eleira turned around again. 'Stay a few lengths behind me,' she ordered. As Alathannas had done earlier, she sped back to meet the bikes.

Instead of flying above the orks' heads, she stayed at ground level. The bikers, four of them, found themselves on a collision course with her, shuriken volleys cutting into their vehicles and their flesh at eye level. The bikes veered off to either side. While the orks fought to regain control, they were easy prey for Alathannas and Kuthalen.

They had gained a breathing space for the few minutes it would take the other orks to arrive. Ahead, another channel joined from the right. The sound of more combat came from the far side of the rock face. Alathannas heard what he was sure was the growl of another large engine. He pointed to the junction and said, 'We could well have tanks on either side of us very soon.'

'If we can foresee that result,' said Eleira, 'be assured that Passavan does, and is doing what he must. The timing will need to be precise.' She took them

towards the junction.

‘For what, autarch?’

‘Bringing the tanks together.’

Alathannas pictured two battlewagons following them into the channel before them. It was still wide enough for the heavy vehicles to enter, but their movements would be even more restricted. Despite the increase in firepower, two tanks would be a liability, one that, with the right lure, the orks would be unable to resist.

‘We want the tanks following us here,’ Eleira said. ‘The farseer has determined that this path will give us what we need to destroy them.’

She did not add, *Before they destroy us*. Alathannas understood the implication all the same. ‘How many of us have fallen?’

‘Too many.’

Deep rumbling from behind, approaching from two angles. Alathannas looked back. He saw Passavan’s bike and the Vyper racing their way, firing shuriken and exterminating energy into the pursuing army. The timing would be as Eleira had ordered.

As the other two eldar skimmers arrived, and all five headed down the channel, there was a moment when the combined fire of the two ork forces reached for them. The sinuous turns of the gully gave the eldar cover after the first few seconds, but by then, the damage had already been done to Kuthalen. Her jetbike’s starboard wing was reduced to a ragged stub. Its flight was uneven. She leaned forward, her back arched with pain.

Alathannas flew beside her. Her helmet turned to face him. She nodded, then dropped back. She was giving the uninjured a clear path. And preparing to give the orks a bitter triumph when she could no longer fight.

The gully’s curves came quickly. Around each, Alathannas hoped to see the salvation that Eleira and Passavan expected to find. It remained invisible. To the rear, the ork bikes kept pace, racing ahead of the battlewagons. Their fire was continuous. They appeared to have unlimited supplies of ammunition.

‘Now,’ Passavan said as the Saim-Hann hit the next corner. The channel kept curving, turning north and east. Part way in, Alathannas saw the trap they needed. Ahead, a rocky arch spanned the gully. The Vyper passed under it. Its gunner turned the lance’s beam on the ends of the arch, alternating shots, working symmetrical weakness into the stone.

‘Slow them down,’ Eleira ordered, heading back towards the orks. ‘Bunch them up.’

Kuthalen shot ahead of her. 'Let the first blow be mine, autarch,' she said. Her jetbike's flight was even more erratic. The strain in her voice was mortal. Will alone was keeping her alive and aloft.

'Granted,' said Eleira. 'With our thanks. Safe journey, Fire Dragon.'

Kuthalen dropped low, her hull almost kissing the river bed. She held her fire. Over the din of their own engines and guns, the orks had no warning of her coming. They met in the curve, less than a dozen metres separating them. Their relative velocity was blinding. The orks appeared, and Kuthalen ploughed into them. She fired at the last second, and decapitated the leading ork. Kuthalen turned her skimmer as she hit. She crashed into two of the enemy at once even as her shuriken sliced through engines and fuel lines. Tangling metal and wraithbone erupted in flame.

Alathannas was startled by the size of the explosion. Kuthalen's vehicle appeared to be the source of the blast, and it blew up too easily, with too much force. At least its death hurt the orks. The remaining eldar skimmers steered around the burning crash, Eleira and Passavan on the left, Alathannas on the right. They strafed the flanks of the orks. The enemy's charge stumbled. The orks turned their bikes towards the attackers, and now they were colliding with each other, driving at cross purposes, firing across the gully. Within seconds, six bikes were caught in the confusion.

The hammering roar of the battlewagons drew closer. The delaying tactic had served its purpose. Alathannas raised his bike over the heads of the ork riders and followed the other two eldar back around the curve. A cannon shell hit the cliff wall on his left. He was buffeted by the blast. A wind of stone shards hit him and his jetbike, shredding his cloak as he drove on.

Behind him came the sound of crumpling metal as the tanks drove over the wreckage. Bullets and shells shrieked past him as the orks moved forward again.

The arch was just metres ahead. Eleira and Passavan went underneath. They kept on going, drawing the orks' attention beyond the natural bridge. Alathannas reached it. Just as he did, another shot from one of the big guns hit the stone. He winced, expecting the rock to fall on his head and disarm the trap, but the arch held.

He was past it now. He kept moving forward, maintaining the lure, but slowed down just enough to look back.

The two battlewagons arrived. The bright lance struck the arch one more time.

From a distance, there was something almost gentle about the touch of light against stone. The effect was massive. The bridge collapsed. Thousands of

tonnes of rock fell on the ork tanks. The thunder of avalanche mixed with the grind of crushed metal. The ground shook with the compressed blast of ordnance exploding. Dust rolled in both directions down the gully. Alathannas turned around again and headed into the cloud. As the echoes of the rock fall faded, he saw the stony heap that marked the grave of the tanks. From the other side came the frustrated howls of orks. Their heavy armour was destroyed, and their way forward was blocked.

Alathannas prepared to take his jetbike over the rubble and into the ork mass. The dust was an opportunity. It was perfectly suited to the path that had long been his. He would strike the orks as a phantom from the white limbo. But before he could descend, Eleira and Passavan had joined him.

‘No, ranger,’ Eleira said. ‘Your battle here is finished.’

‘Autarch?’ He could not keep the disbelief from his voice. His battle here was just beginning, he thought. The field of struggle had transformed. It had become his domain.

‘We have hurt the orks,’ Eleira told him, ‘but we are a long way from defeating them.’

‘Our losses elsewhere in this network are severe,’ Passavan added.

‘Our victory is uncertain.’ Eleira paused, letting her words sink in. ‘A loss against the orks here is far more serious than our deaths.’

‘The mission,’ Alathannas said.

‘We might fail here. There is the possibility that the humans will fail against the land train.’

Alathannas looked at Passavan. The farseer was difficult to make out in the billowing dust. His silhouette nodded. ‘The skein is tangled,’ he said. ‘I can discern the paths we must follow, but the outcome of any of them is very uncertain. Our best course is not much better than a hope.’

‘What would you have me do?’ Alathannas asked Eleira.

‘Return to the city. Your skills are suited to more than combat. Find what we seek. If we fall here, you might yet have a chance of preventing the greater evil.’

‘Even if I find it, what can I do alone?’

‘You won’t be alone. We will spare who we can to join you. If you succeed that far, then nothing else matters. We will abandon the struggle here, and do what must be done.’

‘I see.’ He did. He didn’t have to walk the path of the seer to know what the consequences would be. No matter what happened, none of the Saim-Hann on this planet would live to the next dawn. Their doom was a certainty. His heart

felt heavy with the weight of his race's tragedy. The Fall continued to echo in every death, in every lost cause.

Perhaps this cause was not yet lost. The success of the mission would be worth his own death.

He used the cover of the dust to rise out of the gully.

Behrasi heard the huge rumble to the north-east of his position. A few moments later, the dust cloud billowed into the air above the gullies.

'That could have been the work of either side,' Rhamm said.

'True.' He watched the cloud. After a minute, an eldar bike emerged from the dust. It headed west. Back to Reclamation.

'They can't have won already,' Gheara said.

Behrasi tracked the flight of the lone warrior. Just as the xenos was disappearing into the distance, three more jetbikes appeared and flew off in the same direction. 'They haven't won,' he said. 'That's why we're seeing this. Only a few warriors being sent? This is an act of desperation. They think they might lose.'

'What do they hope to accomplish?' Gheara wondered.

'That is our mission to discover.' He waited until the eldar were out of sight and he was certain no others would be leaving the fight with the orks. He contacted Krevaan over the vox. 'Some of the eldar are heading for Reclamation,' he reported.

The Shadow Captain grunted. 'Follow them,' he ordered.

'We are on the point of doing so.'

'Good. See what they do. Keep me informed as best you can,' Krevaan said and broke the connection.

The captain, Behrasi thought, had not sounded surprised at the news. If anything, there had been the satisfaction of having been proven correct in his tone. Behrasi, for his part, felt something closer to disappointment. Perhaps even sadness. He would not go as far as to say that he had trusted the eldar. But he *had* wanted to believe in their honour. He had thought he had seen something of that order in Alathannas when the two forces had parleyed in the city.

As his jump pack took him on the first leap towards Reclamation, the disappointment turned into resentment. He did not like being fooled. By the time he and his squad were halfway to the city, he was furious. He was ready to exact lethal punishment for the xenos' treachery.



CHAPTER SEVEN

There would only be one chance to board the land train. It would come as the ork juggernaut started up the slope towards Reclamation. The road that the train followed passed through a cut in a low hill at the foot of the main slope. The cliff walls on either side of the road were sheer, and about ten metres high. They were close together, too. There would barely be space for the train to pass between them. When it did, that would be Eighth Company's best chance to board. Staying just beneath the brow of the hill, the Raven Guard would be invisible to the orks until the last moment.

Even so, a distraction was needed. If the greenskin engineer had the time to trigger the defences, they might still be enough to sweep Krevaan and his men from the roof. And then the savage machine would not stop until Reclamation was a ruin. Krevaan needed all of the engineer's attention focused elsewhere. His strategy called for a secondary attack, one ferocious enough to resemble the main event.

He would take the strength of one combat squad onto the train. As he disembarked from the *Claw of Deliverance* on the other side of the hill from the train's approach, he addressed the company over the vox. 'Brothers,' he said, 'I want a direct, frontal assault on the enemy. Step out of the shadows, and you will create the ones from which our death blow will come.'

A chorus of acknowledgements followed as he took his squad to the ambush point.

'We will attempt to gain access through a roof hatch?' Thaene asked.

'No,' Krevaan told the Techmarine. 'We should keep our exposure in that position to the bare minimum. As soon as that greenskin tech has any idea of what we are doing, it will hit us with that armament. We'll go down in between the cars.'

In position, the five Space Marines listened to the land train close in. They

could not see it, but the reports of their brothers painted the picture of the battle. The *Claw of Deliverance* launched the assault, raining missiles at the locomotive. The engine drove through the flames. One of the rockets gouged a crater in the road before it. This was no obstacle. The treaded beast dealt with it as it would a simple unevenness in the road. There was no pause in the train's relentless drive forward.

As the engine passed through the fire of the Thunderhawk's assault, the second phase of the attack began. Just beyond the cut, waiting on either side of the hill, were the Venerable Brothers Karom and Raust. The Dreadnoughts of Eighth Company, dropped off by the gunship, now had their moment in a war that had, since the first ambush, been a series of rapid deployments. They were not fast, but they too were creatures of the shadows. They were the hammerblow of night, their attacks as devastating as they were unexpected. They lit up the ork tech's blister with fire that could level a fortress. Karom struck with lascannon, Raust with multi-melta.

Any other vehicle would have died in that moment, its armour pierced and melted to slag. The ork engineer's mad genius of excess stymied the Dreadnoughts. The force field, powerful beyond any rational conception, absorbed the hits and dissipated their energy along the entire length of the train. For a second after each blast from the Dreadnoughts' weapons, the line of cars flashed a sun-bright green and crackled with violet lightning. The locomotive was undamaged. The engineer exulted inside its blister. Karom and Raust continued firing. They could not overload the force field, but the blinding discharge of energy dazzled the ork.

The rest of the company joined the attack. Seven assault squads poured fire at the greenskin. Their shells came at it from all angles. Seventy Space Marines, manoeuvring by jump pack, rose and fell before the land train. Their movements were constant, rapid, erratic. They gave the ork engineer no concentration of targets upon which to retaliate. They were a jagged constellation of war, stretching across the arc of the horizon. The assault squads, Dreadnoughts and Thunderhawk hit the train with a force to level cities. The craters multiplied, turning the land into a moonscape. The ork machine roared on, as if it were the brutal war lust of the greenskins given metal form.

Perhaps it was, Krevaan thought as the disbelieving reports flooded the vox. He had seen enough earlier to know that they would not stop the train through direct means. All of his brothers had, too. But the force field's strength defied reason. There was something malign at work on Lepidus Prime. It manifested

itself in everything from the unusual size and strength of the ork foot soldiers to the mad invincibility of the land train. This was different from what the Imperium had fought on Armageddon. There, the greenskins had been directed by a leader of unholy skill, one whose threat, Krevaan was certain, was still not fully appreciated. The orks on Lepidus Prime seemed... transformed. It wasn't leadership that was animating them. It was something else, something that touched their very being, and all the works that flowed from it.

Unharméd though the train was, the ork tech retaliated as though threatened with imminent destruction. It unleashed the armament in full. Turret cannons opened up. Rockets flew in swarms. The accuracy of the bombardment was nonexistent, but it blanketed everything ahead of the train. The engineer didn't have to aim. If it made the world explode, its enemies would die in that fireball. Krevaan blinked through the readouts of his helmet lenses. He saw one rune after another turn red, then dark, his brothers giving their lives in an attack that was only a diversion, an attack that was, by its nature, doomed to failure.

The battle had been raging for less than a minute. The train was still pulling its length though the cut.

Thaene said, 'Our losses are growing.' He was hearing the same reports. He spoke without emotion, offering an observation, evaluating a situation on the point of deteriorating.

'Yes,' Krevaan said. *I will honour every death*, he thought. Every battle-brother who had fallen had purchased them the hope of victory. 'Now,' he snarled.

Shadows flowed over the hill. Giants in armour became wraiths. Though it was day, the lethal touch of the night reached for the train. Krevaan leapt. He landed on the roof of the second car. The rest of the squad followed. The sound of the impact of their boots vanished under the hill-shaking din of the guns and the engine. The Space Marines stayed low, beneath the fire of the turrets. Krevaan looked across the roof of the next car to the locomotive. The engineer was visible in its bubble. The hunched figure was facing forward, riveted by the unfolding inferno of war.

'Over the roofs?' Dvarax voxed. Natural speech was impossible, even if it wouldn't have given their position away.

'No,' Krevaan said. If the greenskin's attention wavered from the front for an instant and it saw them, it would redirect the turrets their way. They had to use the time bought for them to get beyond the reach of the guns.

Crouching, Krevaan moved to the gap between the first and second cars. He

looked down. There was no platform between them. The coupling was a grotesque conglomeration of pistons, chains and spikes. It made little mechanical sense. It was excessive, it was inefficient, and it was dangerous. Every element of the land train had been weaponised. Any being not heavily armoured that tried to stand on the coupling would be ground to blood and meat by the moving metal.

There were doors leading into each car. By contrast to the coupling, they were simple affairs, nothing more than hinged, uneven rectangles. It was as if the makers of the train had grown bored with any elements that could not be put to killing use.

Krevaan pointed to Dvarax, Revaal and Akrallas, then down at the car they were on. He indicated that he and Thaene would take the forward car. The squad understood his intent: kill the sentries, prevent any warning from reaching the engineer.

Krevaan and Thaene leapt over the gap between the cars. Krevaan waited for the other three to get into position. Akrallas took point. He nodded at the Shadow Captain.

Shadows moved again, shadows with mass and force. Krevaan and Akrallas dropped to the coupling. Krevaan felt motion beneath his boots like a sea with claws. Gaps opened and closed between the metal with every jolt of movement as the train rumbled over the craters. Krevaan grounded himself. His legs moved, adjusting for the motions of the grasping iron. His upper body was motionless. He reached out and grasped the door by a protrusion on its right edge. 'Ready?' he voxed Akrallas.

'Ready.'

The doors opened out, so they struck in two beats. Krevaan yanked his door off its hinges. He lunged inside as Akrallas hauled the other open. The other members of the squad followed. Krevaan knew Thaene was at his back before he had taken two steps into the car. Before him was a cluster of surprised orks. There were four infantry, aiming their guns outside the metal-shuttered windows. They struggled to bring their weapons back in, getting the barrels stuck against the narrow frames. Krevaan dismissed them to the edge of his attention. They were already dead.

The fifth ork was a concern. It was another of the hulking, armoured brutes. This one wasn't quite as massively plated as the others Krevaan had encountered on Lepidus Prime. The armour bore enough spikes to turn its shoulder guards into weapons in their own right, but it wasn't powered. The ork, though, was

huge. It didn't need an exoskeleton when its own frame was so gigantic. One hand wielded a clip-fed pistol the size of a bolter. The other carried a thick, short blade. The monster almost reached the ceiling in the car, but it was prepared for close-quarters fighting. It had decided to leave the ranged combat to its underlings and to the train's defences. It thought ahead. That made it dangerous.

Krevaan lunged at the warboss, slashing at its exposed face with his lightning claws. The ork took a step back, tucked its chin in, and raised its pistol. It fired a volley of bullets at Krevaan and Thaene. The rounds were huge. They punched into the interior walls of the car. Four of them slammed into Krevaan's chest. His armour held, but the inertia of the blows was enormous. They stopped his charge.

The other orks brought their weapons to bear as their leader emptied its clip. Krevaan ducked beneath the swing of the chieftain's blade. He struck out with his right arm and impaled the nearest greenskin through the chest. The ork howled and dropped its gun. Krevaan hauled the ork in and hurled it at the chieftain. The big ork's blade sliced into the minion's ribs and stuck.

Behind Krevaan, Thaene took down the other ork on the right with bolter fire. He trained his servo-arm's plasma cutter on the left-hand enemies. One died immediately, the upper half of its head sheared off. The other pulled the pin on a long-handled grenade.

Krevaan saw the gesture in the corner of his eye. He had fractions of a second to brace himself before the grenade blew up in the ork's hand, setting off all the other explosives the greenskin carried. Inside the confined space of the car, the blast was huge. These were no mere frag grenades. They were another product of the ork engineer's obscene inspiration. The devices were as much incendiary as fragmenting, and they filled the car with flame and shrapnel. The explosions scorched the surface of Krevaan's armour and knocked him sideways. Thaene, closer to the centre of the blast, was knocked to the ground.

The ork chieftain roared through the fire, flesh smouldering, and brought its blade down in a two-handed chop. Krevaan brought his left arm up to block. The ork hit him with strength to shatter steel. The blade cut through the ceramite and into his forearm. He yanked his arm down, dragging the weapon with it, and punched forwards with his right claws. The ork dropped the blade and reared back, but not before Krevaan put out its left eye.

The injury drove the ork to a paroxysm of fury. It came back hard at Krevaan, proving just how dangerous it was by channelling the rage into savage but skilled combat. It rammed him with its shoulder. One of the spikes on the plate

stabbed through Krevaan's gorget and into the side of his neck. The ork knocked him back against the wall, grabbed its blade and attacked again. It used the blade one-handed now, stabbing and slashing with its right hand while it hammered at Krevaan with the mailed left fist.

Krevaan parried and jabbed. He drew more blood, but the ork absorbed damage like a sponge. Somehow, its mass and its energy of rage took the place of stronger, more complete armour. It was fast, too, much faster than should have been possible for a being of its bulk. It was another dark wonder of the orks of Lepidus: a serious threat that had been transformed into a monster.

Behind it, Thaene had recovered. He aimed his plasma cutter at the combatants. The end of the servo-arm swivelled back and forth as Krevaan and the ork slashed, blocked, lunged and grappled. 'Shadow Captain?' the Techmarine asked.

'I have this.' Krevaan grunted as the ork landed a heavy blow against the side of his helmet. 'Do what we came for.' If the engineer had heard the explosion, it might be preparing a counter. The orks had little regard for each other's survival. He would not be surprised to learn that the locomotive had a cannon that could fire through the car interiors.

Thaene moved to the far end of the car. There was no door. The land train's maker did not trust its passengers to have easy access to the locomotive. Thaene turned the plasma cutter on the wall.

Krevaan forced the ork back with a flurry of slashes. The chieftain blocked his claws from tearing anything vital, but the brute was covered in its own blood. Krevaan swung up with his left hand and caught the underside of the ork's right arm. He dragged the blades along the arm, slicing off flesh, feeling them grind against bone. He gave his fist a harsh jerk, and severed the ork's right hand at the wrist. The chieftain howled its outrage and stumbled back to the other side of the car.

Krevaan used the second's pause to vox the other group. 'Brothers?' he asked.

'A large contingent, Shadow Captain,' Akrallas answered. 'There were too many sentries to kill at once. They raised the alarm. The whole force on this train is converging on our position.'

'Do what you must,' Krevaan answered, and then the ork was attacking him again.

It lunged with its left arm outstretched. It did not try to strike him. Instead, it sprayed a vast quantity of blood at Krevaan, completely covering his helmet. Through its lenses, he saw nothing but blood. He wiped them clear, but for a

vital moment, he could not see the ork. He swung with his right hand, trying to ward off an attack. The ork came in low. It rammed its blade up the inside of his left arm, piercing the armour's seam. Pain flashed down the length of his arm.

At the end of the car, Thaene finished cutting through the metre-thick metal. He kicked the wall down. The cut slab fell onto the coupling between the locomotive and the car, then to the ground.

Krevaan propelled himself forwards as if catapulted. He slammed into the brute. His momentum carried them both past Thaene and through the gap in the wall. They fell on the coupling. The grinding mechanism bit through the ork's armour and seized its flesh. It beat at Krevaan, its blows still heavy but panicked now, losing precision as it reacted to its danger.

Krevaan shoved himself away from the ork. He reached back and grabbed the ragged edge of the hole to pull himself back to his feet. The chieftain raged and struggled, but the mechanism held it fast and pulled it deeper into the gears. Krevaan now saw purpose in the excess of the construction. The cars were not linked by simple couplings. They were linked by traps. They were yet another of the train's defences. The ork was falling victim to the engineer's designs.

Steadying himself, he stomped on the ork's chest, driving it further into the hungry metal. The greenskin's howls of rage became screams. Bone snapped. Flesh tore. The monster's body was rendered bit by bit to pulp. For a surprisingly long time, it struggled to reach Krevaan and drag him down to the same fate. Then it was gone, the metal shards of its armour bouncing off the machinery to the ground.

Thaene joined Krevaan at the gap. Behind them, they could hear the battle against the other orks still raging. The snarls and sounds of gunfire blended with the raucous beat of the engine and the clanking of treads. There was still no sign that the ork engineer had realised anything was wrong. If there was any way that the troops in the cars could communicate with the locomotive, they weren't using it.

The engineer was still consumed with the challengers before it. Ahead, the sky was a lighting storm of war. Rockets and shells flew from the train in answer to those that surrounded it with a halo of fire. The machine was moving uphill now. As Krevaan stepped back into the car, he heard a massive detonation. The big cannon on the rear car had fired. Krevaan saw the comet streak of its shell arc upwards. It had been fired at a target far beyond the attacking Raven Guard. It had, he realised, been fired at the city. A few moments later, there was a flash from beyond the horizon, reflecting against the low clouds. Reclamation had

taken its first hit.

‘Do it quickly,’ Krevaan said to Thaene.

The Techmarine trained his plasma cutter on the coupling. As it came apart, the machinery flailed like the ork had, pistons and chains and gears flying apart with centripetal violence. ‘This obscenity is an insult to the Omnissiah,’ Thaene said. His tone was even, the venom present only in the words themselves. But to the degree that Krevaan had ever known Thaene to express satisfaction of any kind, he was doing so now as he set about cutting the land train’s throat.

The coupling gave a final, tearing death cry before the flare of the plasma cutter, and the link between the locomotive and the cars was severed. For a moment, the two sections of the train continued moving forwards. The cars lost speed quickly, their momentum drained away by mass and friction. The treads slowed to a halt. The locomotive pulled ahead, its own speed increasing. It advanced another fifty metres before it began to slow. After another ten, it stopped.

Thaene said, ‘The defences are still operational.’

Krevaan nodded. The turrets on the cars had not stopped firing. The big cannon boomed again. He jumped to the ground and looked up. He saw the flash and crackle of dissipating energy as Raven Guard attacks were neutralised along the entire length of the train. ‘The force field is still up too,’ he said. Whatever power system the ork engineer was using, it was not dependent on the physical connection of the land train to work. And the locomotive had not gone far enough to break the energy link.

No matter. It was the engine and the being inside that counted. Once they were dead, the rest of the train would follow. And the advance had been stopped. That much was important.

As if to contradict him, the big cannon fired once more. The flash of the detonation came a few seconds later. Reclamation was hurt, and it would bleed until the engineer was destroyed.

‘Brother Akrallas?’ he voxed. He ran towards the locomotive. Thaene followed.

‘Holding, Shadow Captain.’ His discipline hid his pain. Krevaan heard it anyway. ‘We have lost Brother Revaal.’

‘You are wounded.’

‘We both are.’

‘Your evaluation?’

‘The orks have the numbers.’ The statement was not a surrender. It was mere

accuracy. Akrallas was letting him know what was inevitable unless the circumstances changed. It fell to him and Thaene to make that change.

‘How long?’ Krevaan asked.

‘As long as we can.’

‘Thank you, brother.’

The ork tech was still in its blister. It was looking back as Krevaan and Thaene raced towards the engine. It was very still, its revel arrested. Krevaan could feel the rage in its glare, and he rejoiced that the beast was at last experiencing the possibility of defeat. He and Thaene drew nearer. Thirty metres away, the massive hulk of the locomotive loomed before them, the blister no longer visible. The defences lashed at the Space Marines. Corner turrets turned away from the diversionary attack and pointed downwards. They rotated back and forth, blanketing the area with shells. They were not aiming, which told Krevaan that the ork couldn’t see them either. It was trying to take them out by destroying the entire region to the rear of the engine.

The turrets pumped out their high explosives with the speed of heavy stubbers. The direction of their fire crossed and re-crossed. Krevaan could see the movement of the guns, could tell where the shells would land. He and Thaene jerked left and right, their race now as much an evasion as it was an assault. They could not avoid the shells entirely. They were buffeted by the blasts. The engineer’s blows chipped away at their strength as they closed with the mobile fortress. They ran through an exploding landscape, fountains of earth and stone erupting on all sides.

The engineer’s guns did not stop them. They reached the locomotive. There was no door at the rear. They began moving clockwise around the engine, looking for the entrance. The cannon fire continued. The engineer must have had a sensor array of some kind, however crude, because the turrets followed their movement. The guns could not aim straight down. Krevaan and Thaene were safe as long as they stayed almost flush with the side of the locomotive.

The left-hand flank of the beast was far from featureless: it was covered in two-metre-long spikes pointing in every direction. The construction was monolithic, overlapping metal plates welded and riveted to excess. There was no entrance on this side. Nor was there on the front, though the jaws of the locomotive looked as if they might well be functional.

‘It would be unfortunate if the only way in is a hatch on the roof,’ Krevaan said. The engineer would have a free hand with the turrets in that case. The Raven Guard wouldn’t last long enough to effect a breach.

‘The greenskin is primitive,’ Thaene said. ‘So are its works. But there is dangerous cunning here. I doubt the beast would give itself only one possible egress.’

The force field flashed and crackled. Krevaan was surrounded by wars that were simultaneously close and distant. His brothers’ assault was a great thunder, but it stopped just short of the land train, as if he were seeing the dissolve into static of a hololithic transmission. Several dozen metres away, the rest of his squad fought an army. He knew this, but his only evidence was vox communication. The sounds of that conflict were drowned out by the din of rockets and cannon. And somewhere further out, so distant at this moment that the struggle was almost mythical, the eldar fought another army. The final outcome of all those battles hinged on what he and Thaene did in the next few minutes.

On the right flank, Thaene pointed to a metal slab near the bottom of the locomotive’s skirt. It was smaller than all the other pieces, and was an almost even rectangle in shape. A single spike stuck out of the centre. ‘Here,’ Thaene said. He examined the welding. ‘None on the outside,’ he said. ‘From the inside only.’

‘No one in, but it can get out,’ Krevaan said. ‘No trust among the greenskins.’

‘None,’ Thaene agreed. He started cutting along the outline of the entrance frame. The plasma beam sliced through the seal in a few seconds. Thaene gripped both sides of the door. Krevaan readied his bolter. Thaene yanked the door free.

The entrance exploded. A huge blast of flame billowed out of the train’s interior. It smashed Thaene back, picking him up and hurling him across the blasted landscape. Krevaan had been standing a few metres to the side. He was brushed by the explosion, and that was still strong enough to knock him to the ground, armour smoking. The flames dissipated quickly. Krevaan risked looking in the entrance. He saw a narrow tunnel snaking its way deeper into the machine. On both sides of it were the immense gears, pistons and ill-defined mechanical follies that were the orks’ stock in trade. There did not appear to be any further traps.

Krevaan looked back at where Thaene had landed. The Techmarine had ploughed a furrow into the ground when he had hit. He had been standing in the mouth of a giant cannon just as it had fired. ‘Thaene!’ Krevaan called over the vox. The Raven Guard’s rune was flickering red in Krevaan’s display.

Thaene’s voice was weak. It could have been mistaken for a burst of static. But

the sounds of a broken machine became words. '*Victorus aut mortis*,' the Techmarine said.

'We will have victory,' Krevaan promised.

He entered the locomotive. The passage took him through the interior of a monster's heart. The air itself pulsed with the arrhythmic beat of huge mechanisms. There was barely enough room for him to walk without scraping against the tangle of heavy machinery on either side. The vehicle was not advancing, but it was very much alive, waiting only for the command of its master to rumble over any resistance. Vast breaths of steam gasped periodically from vents and nozzles placed at odd angles in haphazard locations.

Halfway across the width of the locomotive, the passage turned right. On both sides now, Krevaan saw pistons the size of a Predator tank's cannon. There were multiple sets, driving gigantic gears. There was little in the iron phantasmagoria that made any kind of sense. Krevaan could not imagine how the grinding work around him made the engine function. Against all reason, it did.

The noise was enormous. Hissing and clanking and complaining metal filled the uneven pauses between the beats. Krevaan didn't worry about stealth. He couldn't hear his own footsteps, which meant he wouldn't be able to hear the approach of the ork tech, either. He walked with bolter pointing forward, eager to send the greenskin aberration to oblivion. There was no sign of the engineer.

The passage ran forwards most of the length of the locomotive. It ended at a ladder that went up three metres to a second level. Here, the way was even more cramped. The restless, groaning, shuddering web of machinery pressed in, surrounding him. He did not feel as if he were moving through the interior of an engine. He could see individual components whose function he could understand, ones that had a clear purpose of propulsion or the production of energy. But so much more of the engineering seemed to exist for its own sake.

Perhaps, Krevaan, thought, it was yet another symptom of the supercharged nature of these orks. Even the drive that led to the construction of monstrosities like the land train had been exaggerated. The ork tech had built and built and built, unable to stop, and the end result was a creation whose enormous excess meant that it was as indestructible as it was nonsensical.

Still no sign of the ork. Krevaan advanced halfway down the tunnel of gears and steam, then stopped. He knew where his enemy was: the blister. The ork controlled all aspects of the train from there, including all the defences. There would be no reason for the greenskin to leave that redoubt. If it had guarded so elaborately against attack so far, there would be other death traps ahead. Krevaan

wasn't interested in fighting this battle on the engineer's terms. He would make the field of engagement his own. He would show the ork that there were shadows even here, where it felt safest.

He examined the machinery more closely before deciding that there was no way of predicting the consequences of what he did next. The prospect pleased him. He would turn disorder and the storm of war back on the ork.

He took a frag grenade from his clip and threw it to his left, deep into the gears. It bounced back and forth off the metal organs of the locomotive, then dropped towards the first level. Krevaan lost sight of it. The detonation was muffled, barely audible over the clanks and growls and hisses. For a few seconds, there was no change to the din, as if the locomotive had swallowed the grenade without notice. Then a different sort of grinding began. Its pitch started high and went higher. It was joined by a rising chorus of metal complaints as components scraped against each other and the perverse workings of ork technology began to go awry.

Krevaan threw a krak grenade to the right. When it went off, its light and heat were also smothered by the intricacies of the machines, but its damage was felt, and the metallic shrieks grew louder yet. Live steam filled the passageway. Krevaan heard the angry buzz of multiple electrical shorts nearby. He smelled smoke. He couldn't hear the crackle of flame, but his readouts indicated a rise in temperature.

Visibility across all the energy spectrums fell to zero. As the locomotive writhed in machinic pain, it was filled with shadow. If the ork remained in the blister, Krevaan would take the engine apart with his bare hands until the engineer had nothing but its hiding place left. Krevaan started moving forwards again, certain that he had forced his enemy to join him.

He was right. The ork dropped down in front of him from a tube in the ceiling. It was shorter than he was, but only because it was bent over from the weight of the giant harness on its back. Violet energy blazed from the towering coils of the harness, distorted light fighting the darkness that Krevaan had claimed for his own. Its left arm was a huge prosthetic. In its right, it held a gun that looked like a twisted, sawn-off lascannon.

The Shadow Captain fired, point-blank. The mass-reactive shells slammed into the beast's force field. The violet flashed brighter, and the shells disintegrated. The ork didn't even blink. It grinned, and pulled the trigger of its own weapon. A beam of focused energy hit Krevaan in the chest. It threw him back down the passage, embedding him in machinery at the far end. Damage runes flared. His

pauldron was cracked and smoking. His power pack struggled against the massive spike in temperature. Servo-motors stuttered, and for a moment his right arm shook back and forth. He steeled himself, fighting down the neurological chaos that raced up his spine and through his cortex. Will, strength and discipline worked in concert to return mobility to him.

The engineer was advancing towards him. Dark lightning arced about the muzzle of the gun as it recharged. Krevaan lurched forward, tearing himself free of the nest of wreckage and maglocking his bolter to his thigh. Pipes burst. Gas flooded the space.

Krevaan threw a krak grenade before the ork. It stepped back, perhaps on instinct, perhaps because it recognised the damage that was about to happen to the floor. The lightning around the gun became a sharp flash, then stopped. The engineer aimed it at Krevaan.

The grenade went off. The heat ignited the gas. Everything became light and flame. The filters in Krevaan's lenses dimmed, protecting his sight with momentary darkness.

He didn't need to see. He had already chosen his target. He leapt to the right, into a gap between two large gear wheels. Behind him, he heard the blast of the ork's weapon, the shot going wild. There were more explosions. The rumble of the machinery was giving way to the roar of fire and the ever-rising screams of metal and energy and movement racing to destruction.

His lenses cleared, and Krevaan moved deeper into the machine. There was more light now, flashing and angry, creating shadows that raged like black flame. Krevaan joined them. He was the dark that moved through the ork's stronghold. He was the dark that even this greenskin would have to fear. He was the dark that vanquished.

Krevaan advanced more by feel than by sight. He grabbed a piston, let it carry him away from the wheels, released it to drop onto two more that moved in opposite directions. As great as the mass of his power armour was, the components of the machinery were more than strong enough to support him. The very strength of the locomotive's construction was making its gradual destruction all the more violent.

Spider in a moving, unravelling web, Krevaan made his way forward. He drew level with the ork tech. He caught glimpses of the brute through the smoke and clashing gears. It was looking for him, moving back and forth on a small strip of floor between the ladder and the hole created by the grenade. It was snarling, and its attention seemed to be divided between its search and rage at the spreading

damage. Krevaan kept watching, and kept moving. The engineer's movements became more frantic. It was growing anxious. As it should. It was surrounded by shadows, and one of them was coming to kill it.

For several metres, Krevaan's access to the ork was blocked. Then he reached a periodic gap. He stood on a crankshaft whose rotation was becoming more and more erratic. Ahead of him, a giant fan turned. Its blades were serrated for no reason beyond the orkish need for violence in all things. Its rotation was sluggish, and it had already lost one blade. Every couple of seconds, the broken section went by. If he moved quickly, he could get through. If his timing was off, he could be caught and dragged down into the growing mangle of iron and fire.

Krevaan waited through a few revolutions. There was little regularity to them. The fan's rhythm was broken. Nearby, Krevaan could hear more of the mechanism giving way. There was another gas leak, another explosion. The interior shook with the ecstasy of dissolution. Krevaan held himself steady, eyed the fan, and chose his moment. He threw himself forward while a blade was still blocking his view.

He hit the fan's position as the gap appeared. He shot into the passageway, shadow and hammer, and slammed into the engineer. Its force field repelled all forms of energy, including the kinetic. But Krevaan gambled that a certain velocity was needed for the effect to be triggered. If nothing passed though, the greenskin would long since have suffocated. As he and his squad had penetrated the train's shield, he now broke through the engineer's personal defence, smashing the ork against the machinery on the other side of the tunnel.

The engineer reacted with surprising speed, smashing its power claw against him. The fingers were tools. Cutters and drills burned into the side of his armour. He held fast against the assault for a moment, then let himself be hurled to the left. The ork growled with satisfaction. It took a step forwards.

Krevaan kept going left, coming around the engineer's flank. He stabbed at the harness with his right hand. His lightning claws shattered one of the coils. Violet energy lashed out. It struck his arm and travelled up his spine. He took in the electric pain and swung his left fist in. He destroyed a second coil and plunged the claws deep into the harness, through the ork's back.

The ork howled. It tried to turn and shake him off. It couldn't reach him. Keeping his right claws embedded in the greenskin's back, Krevaan brought the left ones down again, and then again. The coils exploded. Krevaan was bathed in an electrical storm. Pain raked his nerves. His body sought to betray him and flail in the grip of the chaotic discharge. He stabbed again. Bursts strong enough

to incinerate a grox shook him. He grappled with a mass of desperate fury.

Another explosion shook the interior. He almost lost his grip on the ork, and his left fist hesitated before the descent. The engineer brought its right arm up and aimed the gun over its shoulder. Krevaan stared down the barrel. He changed the angle of his blow. He brought the claws into the side of the body of the gun. He breached the weapon just as the ork pulled the trigger.

A volcano erupted in the centre of the locomotive. The engineer was vaporised by its creation. Krevaan flew, a burning mass, into the machinery. Disintegration and avalanche and molten fury surrounded him. They tried to tear a hole in the world, to smash his sense of direction, his will, his consciousness. He refused them and dropped into the maw of the destruction, kicking and punching through hungry debris. He was no longer in the midst of a mechanism. He was in an iron gale. He was buffeted by shrapnel twice his size, seized by explosions and geysers of flame. He kept his sense of direction. He was knocked off his feet. He had to crawl beneath collapses. He fought his way through the vortex of an impossible creation finally succumbing to its own irrationality. He stayed true to his course.

Severed fibre bundles rendered his armour heavy. His movements grew sluggish, precision lost. The temperature regulator had shut down. He didn't know how much longer his power unit would function. If it died, so would he, his armour becoming a coffin inside the tomb of the locomotive.

And there, ahead, a glimpse of light that did not flicker: day shining through the egress. He pulled himself forward, managed to rise to his feet as the weight of the wreckage on his back lessened. He heard something very large crack overhead. He tried to run, but moved at a lethargic stumble instead. He reached for the sides of the doorway, grabbed them and propelled himself through as tonnes of metal crashed down behind him.

He fell to the ground. Victory when on his knees would be as unacceptable as defeat, and he forced himself to stand once more. Moving at a glacial pace, feet dragging, he walked away from the locomotive towards the spot where Thaene still lay. 'Brother Akrallas,' he voxed.

Silence.

'Dvarax?'

Nothing.

He looked to the right. Orks were emerging from the last of the cars. There were many, but many were injured, and they were moving with rare caution. They were gazing at the locomotive.

Krevaan turned to see its end. Its armour was cracking like an egg, an angry, molten red shining through the fissures. Incredibly, it still had power. The defence turrets and the cannon were firing, though without direction.

The moment of the great death came. The locomotive did not explode, but a sun blazed through its wounds. The machinic scream was almost sentient. Then the glow was that of ordinary fire. The engine seemed to slump on itself, transformed from monster to wreck.

And suddenly there was calm. Shooting and movement ceased. The sky over the train cleared, the shimmer of the force field gone.

‘Eighth Company,’ Krevaan said, ‘destroy this abomination and all its vermin.’

The orks fought back as the wrath of the Raven Guard descended upon them. They did not fight long.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Shadows followed wind. The eldar were fast. Behrasi didn't expect to catch up with them. It was enough to track them, and he knew where they were heading. The Saim-Hann riders slowed down once they reached Reclamation. They still moved quickly, but with frequent stops, and uncertain, changing direction. Picking up their trail was not difficult. Neither was following them undetected. The xenos warriors' attention was entirely on their search.

The ork shells started hitting shortly after the Raven Guard entered the city. The ordnance was colossal. Each blast was strong enough to level a building. The streets filled with rubble and dust, the bodies of the dead and the injured, and crowds of the mourning, the panicked, and the rescuers. Consumed by their immediate terror and grief, the civilians were unaware of the wind and its shadow that passed near them. Behrasi glanced at the mortals on a few occasions. Avoiding their sight was a simple matter, so automatic that it barely required thought. He wondered briefly what it must be like to be at the centre of a conflict, yet be irrelevant to its stakes and its result. Then he dismissed the thought as a distraction.

Irrelevant.

The bombardment was destructive, but brief. After a few minutes, the distant boom of the great gun ceased. The dust still rolled through the streets. The figures in crimson armour sped up. They appeared to have direction again.

'I think they've found what they're looking for,' Rhamm voxed.

'So it would seem,' Behrasi agreed. He didn't contact Krevaan. He would wait until he was sure. If the command was going to be sent, he wanted to be sure that it would not be as a result of an error.

If it had not been for the destruction rained down on the humans by the orks, Alathannas thought that it might have been hours, perhaps longer, before the idea

had come to him. But the dust was thick, darkening the day in the city. He had seen lights on behind the steel shutters over the hab windows. After one strike, the power had gone out for a moment. The flicker had made him think of the city's energy source, and that was when the realisation had hit.

He knew where he had to look.

He knew why the earlier attempts to locate the goal had been foiled.

The irony that the Saim-Hann encampment had been so close to that goal the whole time did not amuse him. It was too redolent of the perpetual tragedy that haunted his people.

The humans had built their power plant in the north-west of the city, a short ride from the square that the eldar had used as a base. Alathannas and his escort stopped outside it. A colossal aquila rose over the ornate mosaic of the containment dome, the tips of its wings touching the twin cooling towers. Alathannas dismounted from his jetbike and contacted Eleira.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked when he had told her what he had deduced.

‘It would explain our difficulty,’ he said. ‘The human technology is crude, but it is very powerful. The combination of the radiation and the shielding could have interfered with our attempts.’

‘There is something fated about the humans building their power source there,’ Eleira agreed. ‘Search it quickly, ranger. Time is short.’

‘The orks have the upper hand?’

‘Worse. The humans have joined our fight. They have destroyed the rest of the foe. This battle is almost over. You have only a little longer to end the war.’

‘I understand.’

The interior of the control block was deserted. The humans had fled their posts when the shelling had begun. The plant was automated, and though Alathannas saw warning lights flashing on some of the consoles he moved past, there were no klaxons sounding, and the power was still on.

Alathannas passed through a large, high-ceilinged hall. The architecture had the same prefabricated crudeness of the habitation complexes. The walls were grey, their bas-relief sculptures of the double-headed eagle looming on all sides in perpetual judgement. He found a staircase at the rear, and descended the levels of the complex. If he was correct in his surmise, the control centre would, like so many buildings of the human city, have been constructed atop eldar foundations. He had to find his way into them. He was following hope and a guess. The success of the mission depended on luck.

At the lowest level, he found himself in a maze of service corridors. He

paused, frustrated again by the irony that human interference meant that he could not hear the call that was turning the orks into monsters of war. He relied on his skills instead. He chose the corridors that moved away from the core of the plant. He headed into areas that had seen little use since the construction of the building. He followed dust and disuse. At last, he found himself in a chamber at the western edge of the building. Whatever function it might once have had, it had become a storage space of construction leavings, discarded tools, and failed equipment. The lower half of the outer wall was wraithbone.

Alathannas cleared away the detritus. The wraithbone ended a few arm's lengths from the north-west corner. The human portion of the wall was rougher than elsewhere in the room. It was not structurally integral. It was filling a gap. He placed a plasma grenade at its base and retreated to the hallway.

After the flash and the concussion, there was the sound of collapsing rubble. And then, something else. Before Alathannas could step forward, a wave of inchoate aggression slammed him to the ground. It was familiar, yet alien, and as he gasped for breath, struggling to remain conscious and to keep his thoughts coherent, he understood that he had released nothing. He had opened the way for a call to be answered. The actions needed to complete the mission created the possibility of catastrophic failure.

The exultation of war shook the foundations. The earth groaned. The hallways fell into darkness.

A hab in the block nearest the power plant had been felled by the bombardment. Squad Behrasi watched from the rubble as Alathannas entered the plant's control block. The other eldar turned their jetbikes to face away from the plant. They hovered in a semi-circle near the door, guarding all approaches.

'What do they think they're doing?' Rhamm growled.

'Don't try to tell me they're protecting the building,' Gheara said.

'The Shadow Captain says they've been searching,' said Behrasi. 'That might still be the case. Only one has gone in.' He only half-believed his own words. The conviction was growing that Krevaan and Caeligus had been correct about the eldar's perfidy. He waited, though. He would not act without true certainty.

The wait and the doubts ended with the violent rumble beneath his feet. The entire square heaved. Cracks ran up the façade of the power plant. The eldar on watch reacted with startled gestures. One of them doubled over as if in pain.

'Sabotage,' said Rhamm.

Gheara readied his bolter. 'I'll give the xenos this,' he said. 'Their

performance was convincing. I almost believed that they might be honourable.’

‘So did I, brother,’ Behrasi said. ‘So did I.’ Though he was puzzled by the reaction of the eldar to the upheaval, he could not let that distract him from the need to act. Another front had opened in the war. He raised Krevaan on the vox.

As Eighth Company regrouped near the corpse of the train, Krevaan knelt beside Thaene. The Techmarine was conscious. ‘You have earned your rest, brother,’ Krevaan said to him. ‘But you are needed.’

‘Good.’ The Techmarine tried to rise.

Krevaan put out a hand. ‘Stay as you are. Heal. The struggle is not here. I have heard from Brother Behrasi.’

‘I see. The eldar have betrayed us.’

‘Yes. Send the signal.’

Thaene made no movement. Yet Krevaan could sense the passing of a fatal instant.

‘It is done,’ Thaene said.

The Space Marine gunship roared over the gully network, its missiles raining down on the remaining ork vehicles. Caught between the cliffs, the orks had nowhere to run. Eleira and Passavan raced away from the marching detonations. They climbed up out of the network to join what was left of their forces. They had broken the back of the ork army, but the toll had been enormous. There were only four other skimmers left now. Too few.

‘Is Alathannas too late?’ Eleira asked the farseer.

‘We have to try,’ Passavan said.

‘That is not an answer.’

She received her answer a moment later. The jetbikes exploded. There was a flare of intense heat at the base of each one’s engine, followed by a larger blast as the anti-grav motors disintegrated, their energy uncontained and wild.

Passavan and his mount vanished in a fireball. Eleira was thrown from her jetbike. She hit the ground so fast that there was no sensation of flight. She had been riding, and then she was lying on packed earth. She was broken. She couldn’t move, but she could feel the pain of her ending.

Her head rested against a slight rise, and she could see the squad of black shadows arriving on jump packs to the site of the wrecks. The humans, those creatures of darkness and war, had come to finish their work. Night seemed to be falling with their arrival, and she realised it was her vision that was failing. She

hoped that her spirit passed into her waystone before the Raven Guard reached her.

She struggled against the agony and the fading light, finding the breath for one last task. She called across the distance to Alathannas. 'We are betrayed,' she said. 'Hurry. You are the mission's last hope.'

'Let it fail,' he cried. 'Let the humans face the consequences of their actions.'

'And if they are defeated here, too, what then? The consequences will pursue us all. You know your duty, Alathannas.'

'I do, autarch.'

The ranger's agreement was enough. She held on to the knowledge that she had done all she could, and took that with her into the night.

The melta bombs detonated, destroying the jetbikes. One of the eldar died instantly. The other two survived the explosions, one just barely. The other, limping, took cover inside the station. Behrasi moved forward, his squad following. 'Leave the one inside to me,' he said.

He approached the doorway. He was greeted by silence. The eldar might have retreated into the structure. Behrasi acted on the presumption of a dangerous foe. The lumen strips inside the plant were dark. A glance at the way the sunlight fell through the doorway told Behrasi where the shadows were at their most concentrated, where the best position for an ambush would be. He charged inside and swung to the left, firing.

A stream of monomolecular discs greeted his entrance. They sliced deeply into his armour. Blood coursed down from his right shoulder and the side of his throat.

The arc of Behrasi's attack found his target. His shells slammed the warrior back, shattering armour and bone. Behrasi advanced, unwavering death, ignoring the last of the eldar's fire. The xenos fell.

Rhamm entered the station. 'Is that all of them?' he asked.

'Yes,' Behrasi said. 'Now we find the ranger. Stop him before he destroys the plant.'

'I'm surprised he has the means to do so.'

'Perhaps he doesn't.' There had been no repetition of the initial quake. 'Either way, he dies.'

Behrasi glanced at the bloodied eldar once more before beginning the search. The sight of the fallen enemy gave him no satisfaction. He was troubled by something more than a sense of waste. The thought that they had made a tragic

mistake was half-formed.
But it was persistent.



EPILOGUE

The war paused on Lepidus Prime, but the shadows occupied Reclamation. The Raven Guard transferred their encampment to the square that had been the eldar base. Every paving stone of the city was once more under Imperial rule. The mortals gathered enough courage to venture out of their habs, though they avoided the square. They were frightened of the iron shadows.

Krevaan was alone in the command tent. Field repairs to his armour had given him back a fair bit of mobility. He stood, vox-unit in hand, and spoke to the captain of the *Verdict of the Anvil*. ‘Our mission is complete, Captain Mulcebar,’ he said. ‘The xenos taint has been purged from Lepidus Prime.’

‘I thought so,’ the Salamander said. ‘Our augurs have detected something massive heading for the system. It would seem that the Overfiend has taken the bait.’

‘Then the hour has come for your forces to bring this war to a close. Good hunting, brother.’

‘Thank you. I am still curious as to the orks’ obsession with this system.’

‘As am I. We have been unable to determine the cause of their strength.’

‘And what of the eldar? I understand the White Scars encountered them too.’

‘Another mystery. But we have defeated them as well.’ His answers were bitter on his tongue. The triumph of Eighth Company was ringing hollow. There was so much information that had been denied to him. He had acted as was necessary. If the eldar had managed to destroy the plant, they would have razed Reclamation to the ground. Perhaps they imagined that the Imperium would then have given up on this world, returning it to eldar control. But he had stopped them. His decisions had led to the destruction of all the Emperor’s foes on the planet.

But his information was incomplete, and he knew it. He had erred. He had been arrogant, too quick to act on his hatred. The unanswered questions made

him doubt the truth of his victory. He could not shake the suspicion that somehow, he had won the wrong war.

And the last of the eldar, the ranger, still had not been found. Alathannas had disappeared into the ruins beneath the power plant. The xenos labyrinth had defeated the search. Eighth Company faced hundreds of kilometres of tangled corridors. The paths spiralled off in meaningless directions and disorienting intersections. Alathannas could evade the best part of an entire Chapter indefinitely in that maze. In the end, Krevaan could do little more than station sentinels at the entrance to the ruins. No further harm had come to the plant. As far as Krevaan could tell, Alathannas had been neutralised. But he had vanished.

Krevaan's doubts grew.

The psychic shriek of the slaughter had pursued Alathannas into the underground tunnels. The terrible silence that followed pushed him even further into the depths. He ran on instinct, not quite blind, but without conscious decision. His spirit writhed beneath the lash of rage and grief.

The object of the search, so long concealed, became unavoidable. Alathannas was caught in a whirlpool, racing down a wraithbone vortex. He knew where he was going. He knew what awaited him. Yet, after days of flight into the dark, when he saw the thing, dread drove him to his knees.

Alathannas trembled at the entrance to the chamber. In the centre of this room, at the centre of the serpentine coil of the tunnels, at the centre of the system-wide struggle, was what the Saim-Hann had come to find. He gazed upon the terrible object. He had fulfilled Eleira's final command. He had found it. But he was alone, and there was nothing he could do. He could not remove it from the planet.

Nor did he wish to any longer. His trembling was from anger as well as horror.

The humans had betrayed them. He had deluded himself with the belief that it was possible to forge real links with some individuals of that species. He had hoped, to his eternal shame, that the humans would come to the planet and defeat the orks. He had been wrong. Even if he had the power to take this thing from the planet, what would he do except complete the humans' victory?

If he waited, the orks would return. They had no choice. They could not resist the siren call even if they were not conscious of it. And the humans had been weakened by this first conflict.

Before him, he saw the contours of vengeance given physical shape.

Rising from the chamber floor was a throne. Seated on it was an immense

statue. Its form was distorted, vague, incomplete. It was a body without features. The Lileathan world had been abandoned too long, and what had been left behind had lost its essential connection to the eldar. Endlessly consumed by its fury, the shard of Kaela Mensha Khaine now poured energy into another race, one with an inexhaustible hunger for war.

From this single point, far beneath the surface of Lepidus Prime, wrath called to the orks.

FORGE MASTER



PROLOGUE

A scream.

It had no sound, no breath and no voice. And yet it fell upon him with claws of grief. The scream grew until its non-sound tore his soul apart.

Elisath woke to agony. He had done so for days, weeks; long enough for time to blur, for the past and the future to be lost in an undifferentiated present of drudgery and beatings. His material reality was so present in its pain that it had overwhelmed his senses, shattered his concentration and cut him off from anything other than the torture of his body. The orks had worked him until he had given out. His body was old, weaker than those of the other eldar slaves. His eyes fell on his hands, on the long fingers so translucent, already so far gone towards crystallisation. He was a long way down the Path of the Seer. He had travelled so far that the end of his bodily existence was the shaping fact of his reality. Every perception was filtered through the imminence of his fusion with the infinity circuit. Or so it had been before his capture. The orks had turned him from a being of spirit to a being of nerve endings. But when he could work no longer, they hadn't killed him. They had taken everything from him. They had even stolen his waystone, either through greed or instinctive cruelty. But they kept him alive. Perhaps they had other uses in mind for an eldar farseer. As brutish as the orks were, they had a cunning that was dangerous to dismiss. Especially their leader.

So Elisath woke to agony, but that was nothing new. The new thing, the terrible novelty, was that he hadn't been jolted to consciousness by a kick in the ribs or a whip across the back. He had been woken by an even greater agony: he had heard his brother's psychic death cry. It had resonated in his mind and soul as if it were his own scream, but because it was not, it carried the extra charge of consuming grief. And there was still worse. Beyond the pain, beyond the grief,

there was the knowledge of what his brother's end meant. He had a responsibility now, one he couldn't fulfil.

The consequences were the raw stuff of despair. They did not take a farseer to predict. The shard of Kaela Mensha Khaine was his to guard and protect. He could not do so, not when he couldn't even help himself. Broken and in fetters, he had no recourse other than to pray to murdered gods and a splintered one that the shard remain hidden. He tried to divine if it would, but when he sent his consciousness out onto the skein, he ran into the disordered, psychic fury and energy of the orks. The threads of possibility were altered and torn so quickly, and so chaotically, that he could follow no coherent pattern, and the orks' psychic presence, an incandescence of exuberant anger, threatened to drown him. And he couldn't venture any further than the immediate disorder. He had no runes. They, too, had been taken from him. He had nothing to guide him out and back along the temporal weave.

Something was coming. Elisath heard the boisterous cacophony of the guards change in tone. Brawls and barbaric laughter ceased. In their place came awe, excitement and fear.

Elisath looked up. His cell was little more than a closet, a place to store a possession rather than a living thing. It was barely high enough to sit up in, and he could not lie down without curling foetal-tight. The floor was deep in filth, an archaeology of misery. The door to the cell was, like so much of this ship, crude, clumsy but effective. It was a patchwork of scrap metal, welded together into an object as strong as its edges were ragged. Instead of bars, Elisath looked through gaps and rips in the metal. They were wide enough for him to see the ship's corridor. They were so narrow, he couldn't pass his arm through without slicing open his wrists. He watched, waiting, as the creature approached. The ripples of its presence spread before it. Orks howled in ecstatic worship. Prisoners whimpered, hoping for a quick death. Crouching, Elisath kept his gaze steady. He feared ends far worse than his own demise.

He could hear the beast coming now, its footsteps a pounding drum of war on the metal decking. The booming resonated down Elisath's spine. It grew louder, shaking dust and powdered rust from the door. Just outside his cell, the monster stopped. The only sound now was the ork's breathing. It was a deep, growling rattle, the sound of giant strength and hair-trigger rage reverberating in a vast, echo-chamber of a chest.

The ork blotted out the dim lights of the corridor. Elisath saw nothing but an immense silhouette. It was broader than he was tall. It was violence made flesh.

And it was the ruler of an empire.

Elisath couldn't see the ork's eyes, but he could tell from the tilt of its head that it was looking at him. It was pausing, thinking. A meditating ork, in Elisath's experience, was one of two things. It was either comically idiotic, or fantastically dangerous. There was nothing humorous in the shape before him. There was only doom.

The ork whirled and bellowed an order. Its voice was a rasping thunder. It strode off. As it did so, Elisath collapsed against the rear wall of his cell. He gasped. The tangle of possible futures had suddenly cleared. Elisath could still see no further forwards than he could before, but now there was no need to know more. The ship had changed course. He knew where it was heading.

No, he thought. *Not there. Not this ork.* And still, his knowledge was useless. Still, all he could do was pray.



CHAPTER ONE

What are you? The question lingered. He could not exorcise it.

The predator lurked at the outer edges of the Lepidus System. It moved slowly through the void, waiting for its prey. It was not a sleek hunter, but it was immense. Over four thousand metres long, its hull was thick-bodied, with a massively armed prow that projected forwards like a clenched fist. There was nothing subtle about its design. It was a monster whose every rivet and plate were slaved to a single purpose: the brutal annihilation of its enemies. Now it stalked one particular target, one that had to be lured into the killing ground.

The predator was the *Verdict of the Anvil*, strike cruiser of the Salamanders reserve Fifth Company. On the elevated strategium of the cathedral-like bridge, Captain Mulcebar briefed his officers. His broad, heavy-browed countenance was not one that smiled easily. He had the visage of a stern, impassive god of war, carved out of onyx, his red eyes the glow of the furnace deep within. But as the captain spoke, Sergeant Ba'birin thought he could detect a hard satisfaction in Mulcebar's tone. 'The missions undertaken by our brothers in the Raven Guard and the White Scars have been successful. The orks have been dealt severe blows on the planet and its moon. Of more immediate concern to our mission, these two strikes appear to have had the desired effect. Our sensorium has detected the warp displacement of a large body, accompanied by numerous smaller ones, on approach.'

'He is coming,' Sergeant Neleus said.

Mulcebar nodded. 'So it would seem.'

There was a stirring among the officers, an anticipation of battle that bordered on eagerness. For some, and Ba'birin was one of those, the wait had been galling. First, the Salamanders had been diverted from their original course.

They had been bound for Antagonis, there to assist the Black Dragons combat a plague of undeath. But a more immediate threat to the wider Imperium had declared itself in this system, and so they had responded, only to wait. While the Raven Guard and the White Scars fought with honour, the Salamanders had been stuck out here, hundreds of millions of kilometres from the fields of battle, preparing for an opportunity that might never materialise. Their target was the ork leader himself. The Overfiend. The invasion of the system was his doing, but there had been no possibility of retaliation until now. As far as Imperial intelligence could tell, the Overfiend remained within an enormous fleet, one far beyond the ability of the currently assembled human forces to tackle. But while they could not go to him, they could make him come to them. The broader strategic goal of killing the Overfiend's lieutenants had been to lure the monster out. And here he came.

The wait was over. The forge of war called.

What are you?

The words looped, a pulsing beat through Ha'garen's head, as he headed for the enginarium. He had not thought the question needed asking. He had not thought about such a question at all. He was himself, as he had always been. There had been changes, these last years. He was aware of them, even if there was no emotional weight that accompanied that awareness. But the essential truth remained. He was Ha'garen, Techmarine of the Salamanders Fifth Company. How could there be any questions to ask?

But one had been asked, and not *who are you?*, as damning and doubting as that would have been. *What are you?* The doubts were far more fundamental, his identity questioned down to its absolute core. And the question had been asked by not just any brother, but by Ba'birin.

Ha'garen's mind, seeking the roots of its unease, flew back to Heliosa, the Beacon City of the Salamanders' home planet of Nocturne, more than a century ago. Two aspirants survived the trials to become Scouts. That they had known each other before their first true testing on the anvil was unusual. What was unheard of was that they came, essentially, from the same house. Ba'birin was the son of a dealer in sa'hrk hides. His family had taken in the orphaned Ha'garen when his parents had died in the Time of Trials. The two boys had bonded. They were both apprentices to Ba'birin's father, though Ha'garen had shown none of his foster brother's promise as a tanner. Then they were recruited. They triumphed together. They became Scouts together.

They became Salamanders together. Fireborn.

For seventy years, they fought side by side, bringing the wrath of Vulkan down on the Emperor's enemies. Each knew the other's combat craft as intimately as his own. Their war was a synchronous meshing of lethal gears, never retreating, always implacably advancing on the foe. Their styles were different but complementary. Ba'birin was as mercurial as a Salamander ever became, and had a gift for improvisation. His feints and counter-attacks surprised the enemy, but not his battle-brother, who provided the anchor for their joint assaults. Ha'garen was the constant, unwavering, metronomic beat of relentless war upon which Ba'birin built his flourishes and variations. Ha'garen was the anvil against which Ba'birin's spirited hammer smashed xenos, heretic and traitor.

For seventy years, they forged a chain of comradeship. But Ha'garen had a gift with machines. The boy had been hopeless with the organic messiness of hides, but the Space Marine understood the mechanical, and when he spoke to that world, it responded. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that just over thirty years ago, Captain Mulcebar had sent him to Mars.

He returned a Techmarine. And then, before he could regain his bearings after his absence, Nocturne was invaded. Mulcebar and the Fifth were tasked with the defence of Heliosa. Ba'birin and Ha'garen were on the front lines, fighting for the life of the Sanctuary City of their births.

It was not a happy reunion. Ha'garen could recognise strain on Ba'birin's face, though he did not feel it himself. In fact, he felt very little at all. His induction into the cult of the Omnissiah had tempered his emotions. His passions had flattened out to a steady, tempered mixture of logic and worship. His mind and soul were filled with the mysteries of machines and the litanies of the inorganic. When he had become a Space Marine, he had become something his former, mortal, human self would barely recognise, let alone understand. And he had felt the inevitable distance from mortals that a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes experienced. It was a distance that the Salamanders worked to counteract by remaining a part of the society of Nocturne. It was a distance that had become a yawning abyss when Ha'garen returned from Mars. He did not care to bridge it. The flesh was imperfect, a distraction, an obstacle to be overcome. Ha'garen was aware, he thought, of the degree to which he had changed. He knew that his alterations went far beyond the physical. But he did not consider them so radical as to have destroyed the self he had always possessed. It had survived the ascension to Space Marine. It lived on in the Techmarine.

So he believed.

What are you?

The question had come during the battle of Heliosa. The heaviest fighting on Nocturne had been at the gates of Hesiod. The contingent of the traitor Nihilan's forces that had besieged Heliosa was little more than a diversion from a diversion, but the kroot and other mercenaries fought there as savagely as anywhere else on the planet. Mulcebar had his squads fight as if to lose Heliosa would be to lose Nocturne. Honour, loyalty and love of the home world demanded nothing less. And so, for the first time in three decades, Ha'garen and Ba'birin were in combat at each other's side.

Their synchrony had once been such that they had fought like a single machine. Now that a large part of Ha'garen *was* machine, the unity was lost. Ha'garen could no longer see Ba'birin's flourishes as anything other than excessive. They were a pointless waste of energy, a deployment of technique for technique's sake. He saw no need to cater to them, and could not fathom why he once had. They brought terrible wrath down on the enemy, and butchered the foe in numbers that made hills of corpses, but the music of their joint actions was discordant. They fought well because they were Salamanders. They no longer fought well together.

When Nihilan's terrible weapon blasted Nocturne to the core, the earth heaved and danced, and walls hurled themselves to the ground. The enemy streamed through overwhelmed void shields and into the city. The savages and xenos filth wasted no time in descending upon the civilian population. It was as if they knew they were bound to be defeated, and had decided to enjoy a premature sack of Heliosa rather than face a futile struggle against the unwavering strength of the Salamanders. There was no strategy. There was only the barbaric impulse to cause as much harm as possible before being stopped.

A ten-metre breach in the wall opened at the position held by Ha'garen and Ba'birin's squad. Ba'birin and three other battle-brothers fell with the stone and rockrete. Rubble pounded the Salamanders. Beneath Ha'garen's feet, the wall still stood. He looked down and saw his brothers shrugging off the wreckage. They were monuments, animated statues rising from ruins to defy a hostile fate. They were not to be stopped.

Nor were their enemies, who traded indomitable strength for the power of the swarm. Kroot and human stormed into a civilian compound fifty metres back from the wall. The people of Heliosa had the innate strength and resilience of all Nocturneans, and they were armed, but they were no match for the military

savagery that came at them. Ha'garen saw Ba'birin lead his group of Salamanders to the defence of the populace. He took in the relative distances between the civilians, invaders and Space Marines. The outcome was obvious. The Salamanders would annihilate the foe, but be too late to prevent the slaughter of the civilians. A few paces to his right there was a heavy bolter turret. Its gunner was dead, but the weapon was still functional. Ha'garen manned it, even as Ba'birin's voice came in over his comm-bead.

'Brother,' Ba'birin said, 'we could use your assistance.'

Two choices now. The first was whether to join the ground-level combat or hold his position, and it was really no choice at all. To give up any tactical advantage was irrational in the extreme. The second choice was where to aim the turret: turn it to face the interior of the redoubt and provide assisting fire, or train it on the larger body of the enemy still surging towards the breach.

Again, there was really no choice.

Ha'garen opened fire. The turret's *chug-chug-chug* was the pounding rhythm of Vulkan's hammer, the perfect regularity of machined death blasting xenos and heretic mercenaries to bloody pulp.

'Ha'garen?' Ba'birin voxed.

'I am doing what I must, brother,' Ha'garen responded. And that was not concentrating on a specific skirmish whose outcome would not be affected by any action on his part. He was laying waste to the foe, damaging his war-making capacity by culling his numbers and slowing his advance. The invaders charged forwards in their hundreds. There were far more than Ha'garen could hope to kill, but they were not infinite. As the turret's mass-reactive shells exploded flesh and bone, punching bursts of dirt and blood skywards, the assault lost strength and momentum. Ha'garen made a difference.

But not the right one, as far as Ba'birin was concerned. It was the first time Ha'garen had knowingly acted against the wishes of his brother. They had not been in concert; they had been at cross purposes. Ha'garen's worst sin, it appeared, was a distorted sense of priorities. He learned this after the battle, after the war. Heliosa was secure, and the slow staunching of Nocturne's wounds had begun. It was then, while Ha'garen was salvaging usable weaponry from the field, that Ba'birin confronted him.

'You abandoned us,' Ba'birin said without preamble.

'I made a decision based on tactical necessities.'

'The people of Nocturne are our charges.'

It seemed to Ha'garen that his battle-brother was speaking from an impulse of

sentiment, not reason. 'Our duty was the successful prosecution of the war. I followed my duty.'

And then the question came. Ba'birin shook his head. 'What are you?' he said, and walked away.

Puzzled, Ha'garen had watched the other Salamander as he receded through smoking metal and charred rubble, then turned back to his work. The question was an odd one, but he did not feel its full weight just then. What he felt was the rift with Ba'birin. To the extent that he still experienced emotions at all, the loss of that comradeship gnawed at him, and would continue to do so in the days and months that followed. It was the news about Argos that turned the question into a refrain that no force of reason or passage of time could exorcise. Argos's mind had been infected by an enemy attack, turning him from his true course, making him act against his brothers. The Forge Master had realised what was happening and managed to excise the infection, but not before causing considerable damage. The event disturbed Ha'garen. That Argos, one of the mightiest of the Chapter's Techmarines, could be attacked at such a fundamental level was more than a warning against complacency. Ha'garen was engaged on a path that meant a metamorphosis of body and of self. If the greatest of his kind was vulnerable, then so was he, and how was he to monitor his journey? How was he to know if his transformation took him down deviant paths?

What are you? The question did not have the easy answer it should.

He reached the enginarium. This would be his field in the battle ahead. He would be guardian of the *Verdict of the Anvil*, preserving its spirit and maintaining its body as the ship brought the fury of Vulkan down on the long-awaited foe. Surrounded by machines, immense beasts of metal flesh and plasma heart, he was among kin. Litanies of battle, sanctity and calm sprang to his lips. He began his communion with his gargantuan charge, preparing the ship for the fight. Tech crew and servitors flew to the tasks he assigned them, and the cavernous space echoed with the thrum and clatter of a collective action as perfectly timed and choreographed as it was precise. The question's refrain faded into the background of Ha'garen's consciousness as he became one with the *Verdict*.

The mechanistic dance of war began.

On the main tactarium screen, Mulcebar watched the enemy transition into the materium. The ork warlord was coming in strong. The massive kill kroozer was escorted by a cluster of attack and ram ships. Mulcebar was looking at a storm

system of brute aggression. The squadron was an expression of greenskin nature. The ships were ramshackle, blunt in form and function, and dangerous in the extreme. The very fact that, against all logic, they did not spontaneously explode was itself a sign that to underestimate the orks would be suicidal.

The *Verdict of the Anvil* was massively outnumbered. It was alone.

It was more than strong enough. The predator waited, silent, running dark, for the orks to come within range.

‘Nova cannon powering up,’ Phanes reported.

‘Thank you, helmsmaster,’ Mulcebar answered. He would strike the ork kroozer a death blow, then close in to exterminate surviving ships. He planned to avoid close-quarters fighting. The decision was a pragmatic one. A commander who rushed in to grapple with the orks was playing the greenskins’ game, and was a fool. There was nothing heroic in throwing away the lives of warriors and crew. This ork, through the schemes of his underlings, had already proven himself the most dangerous of his kind Mulcebar had ever heard of, barring the beast of Armageddon. But he would shortly be ash. Mulcebar eyed the screens, waiting for the nova cannon to be fully charged, and for the target to be acquired. As yet, the ork squadron showed no sign of being aware of the *Verdict of the Anvil*’s presence.

‘Target within range,’ the gunnery officer called out.

And the cannon was ready. Mulcebar opened his mouth to give the order.

Then the astropathic choir sang, and changed everything.

The music of the gears had been disrupted. The hymns of the engines were unsung. The captain had summoned him to the bridge. When he arrived, Ha’garen saw that Ba’birin and all the other squad leaders had been assembled too. A second full briefing, so soon after the last, and a critical action aborted. The Techmarine did not like the portents.

Mulcebar’s expression also boded ill. It was thunderous with frustration and distaste. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘I have received a communication whose urgency is matched only by its *timeliness*.’ He spat the last word. Ha’garen had never seen his captain in a rage. This came close.

Mulcebar paused for a moment before continuing. When he spoke again, his tone was a bit more phlegmatic, as if he recognised the need for what he was going to say, bitterly though he might resent it. ‘The message is from the Stormseer of the White Scars. We cannot destroy our foe’s ship. We must board it.’ He grimaced, as if his next words left a sour taste in his mouth even before

being spoken. 'We must board it and extract an eldar prisoner.'

There was a moment of silence. Ha'garen had seen a familiar light blaze up in Ba'birin's eyes at the mention of a boarding action, and his battle-brother would not be alone, he knew, in relishing the idea of taking the battle to the orks on a more personal level. But the mission the captain had just described was obscene.

'Extract...?' Neleus began.

'Alive,' Mulcebar clarified.

'In Vulkan's name,' Ba'birin said softly. 'Captain, why?'

'Our brothers in the Raven Guard have been encountering orks that are very large and aggressive. Unnaturally so, as if anything about the greenskins can be said to be natural. The strength they are demonstrating is of great concern, however.'

'What does this have to do with our rescuing an eldar?' Neleus asked.

'He is a seer and he knows why this is happening,' Mulcebar answered. 'Our duty, as distasteful as it might be, is clear. We must board the ork ship, find the eldar, and extract him.' His voice turned grim with menace. 'We will then take what we need to know from him.'

It had been a long time since Ha'garen had experienced anything that he would have described as visceral. He did so now. The racial memory of millennia of slaver raids on the people of Nocturne rose in his blood. It demanded satisfaction. That Nocturne was a stalking ground for the dark eldar and not their less hedonistic kin was, for every Salamander, a distinction without a difference. The mission was perverse. Its irony had a tactile cruelty.

'The boarding party will consist of two tactical squads,' Mulcebar said, 'led by Sergeants Ba'birin and Neleus.' He turned to Ha'garen. 'Brother,' he said, 'your skills will be especially needed. We do not know anything about the layout of the ship, much less where the prisoners might be held. Learn everything you can. Guide your brothers.'

Ha'garen lowered his head. 'In Vulkan's name,' he said, 'and with his aid, I will complete this task.' When he looked up, he noticed the look on Ba'birin's face. The other Salamander's lack of expression was eloquent.

The predator had been preparing itself for war. It still was, but for a very different sort. The engines powered up, and the walls of stone and steel vibrated with their gathering strength. The *Verdict of the Anvil* was going to plunge into the ork maelstrom. It would be hunting hard prey.

In the solitorium, Ba'birin also prepared for war. He was engaged in a private

communion with his primarch before joining his brothers for the communal prayer. His weapons had been cleaned, loaded and anointed. They and his armour, and the priest who would dress him in his raiment of war, awaited him in the next chamber. Here, only Akakios, his brander-priest, waited on him. Clad in a loin-cloth, Ba'birin knelt over a fire pit. The heat from the incandescent coals washed over him. He opened his flesh and soul to the purifying sear of the forge, the strengthening pain of the anvil. He thought about the mission, and made himself confront all the elements of it that rankled. He focused most of all on the rescue of the eldar prisoner. He brought all of his revulsion and hatred for that race to the surface, and gave himself over to a spasm of absolute fury. He gave his anger to the fire, so that the forge burned the extraneous emotions away, leaving only duty. When he felt his rage retreat before a calm that was no less implacable, no less determined, he rose and turned to face Akakios.

'I am ready,' he told the priest.

Akakios stepped forwards. The serf's narrow, ascetic face was a lined map of age and piety. He placed the end of his branding rod in the fire pit, heating it to a red glow. Then he brought it up to Ba'birin's chest. To a topography of victories and pledges, he added the brand of another holy promise. Ba'birin stood motionless as he accepted the pain. It was the symbol of duty and its reminder. It was the mark of this mission, binding his life to its completion. The calm he had achieved absorbed the pain and honoured it. Cleansed, steeled, determined, he strode out of the chamber to don his armour.

When he emerged from the solitorium, he found Neleus waiting for him, helm under his arm. 'Brother-sergeant,' he said, nodding in greeting.

'Brother-sergeant,' Ba'birin returned. 'Shall we?' He began to walk down the hallway, heading for the ramps that would take them down to the torpedo deck.

'Would you indulge my curiosity for a moment?' Neleus asked.

Ba'birin paused, his precious calm fraying ever so slightly. 'Of course,' he answered, though an intuition told him that he should not be eager to hear Neleus's question.

'You have your doubts about Techmarine Ha'garen's role in this mission, don't you?'

Ba'birin gave a soft, rueful laugh at his own expense. In his meditation of purging, he had concentrated so completely on the eldar that he had avoided confronting his other source of disquiet. And now here was Neleus, the unknowing tool of fate, to punish him for his dishonesty. Ba'birin accepted his chastisement as his due. 'Was I that obvious?' he asked.

‘Hardly,’ Neleus said, sounding amused as well as concerned. ‘You didn’t react at all.’

‘And that was, in itself, a reaction.’

‘Given the former cohesion of your fighting unit, yes.’

‘You think I don’t trust Brother Ha’garen.’

‘So it would appear.’

‘And so it is,’ Ba’birin admitted. ‘I do not.’

‘You blame his conversion to Techmarine?’

‘I do.’ Ba’birin began walking again, slowly. ‘I believe that he has divided loyalties. I believe that he is finding it difficult to reconcile the Cult Mechanicus and the Promethean Creed. And so I believe that his judgement is suspect.’

Neleus frowned. ‘Forgive me, brother, but you speak as if Techmarines were unknown in our Chapter.’

‘I am not speaking in general. I have the most profound...’

‘... trust?’ Neleus put in.

‘Respect,’ Ba’birin finished, ‘for our three Masters of the Forge. But I can see the difference between Ha’garen as he was and as he now is, and some of his decisions are unsound.’

‘If you are referring to what happened at Heliosa, his actions were entirely justifiable from a tactical perspective.’

‘That they were justifiable doesn’t make them right.’

Neleus shrugged but said nothing, and they walked on in silence for a minute. Ba’birin wasn’t sure whether to read agreement or dissent on Neleus’s part. The other sergeant was one of the most even-tempered souls Ba’birin had ever encountered. Though his ferocity in battle was a sight to behold, and he did not admit even to the mere existence of the word ‘retreat,’ his attitude towards war was very different from Ba’birin’s. The distinction lay, Ba’birin thought, in the fact that where he saw war as the destruction of enemies, Neleus saw instead the defence of the Imperium, of their home world, and of the innocent. Ba’birin exulted in the furnace of conflict, and for this he made no apologies, but he respected Neleus’s more measured philosophy. It was often a valuable corrective when his own enthusiasms threatened to get the better of him. And he had no quarrel with Neleus’s sense of priority. In the end, Ba’birin too fought to preserve, no matter how enthusiastically he sought the fight. So he was surprised that Neleus showed any sympathy at all for Ha’garen’s choice at Heliosa.

Neleus did not speak again until they had almost reached the torpedo deck. ‘Are you really doubting his loyalty? Because if you are, then you must, in good

conscience, warn the captain and the Chaplain.'

Ba'birin sighed. 'No,' he said. 'I'm sure he is loyal, or at least that he believes himself to be.'

'Meaning?'

'In leaving the flesh behind, he is forgetting that he is not a machine, and that he should not be thinking like one. If he loses all connection with the fact that we are, all of us, however much we have been transformed, *human*, then he will make decisions that will take nothing human into account. In the field, those decisions could have terrible consequences.'

'I see.' Neleus's tone was neutral, non-committal, and Ba'birin couldn't tell if he agreed or not. But at least Neleus was following the thread of his logic. 'And we are about to embark on a mission that will require Ha'garen to immerse himself in machinery of xenos design,' Neleus said. 'If he should lose himself in the inorganic, he might act only in its interests.'

'And we will be in his hands,' Ba'birin finished.

The torpedo deck opened up before them. Nestled low in the hull, it was an immense temple consecrated to the destruction of enemies. Row upon row of tubes lined walls that rose dozens of metres. Gantry cranes and gangways fed servitors and ordnance to their positions. At the forward end, a colossal bas-relief sculpture of Vulkan dominated the space. The primarch's hammer was smashing an anvil, and flashing outwards from the blow were the streaks of torpedoes, bound on their missions of righteous punishment.

The squads were assembled. The parchments of new oaths of moment hung from the armour of the Space Marines, fluttering slightly in the light breeze of the ventilation system. The Salamanders were gathered to pledge unity and duty. In their reptile-green armour emblazoned by the snarling profile of their namesake, they were the most honourable of paradoxes. They were both drake and knight. They were self-reliance and devotion to brotherhood. And at their gathering, Ba'birin's chest never failed to swell with pride and humility.

Ha'garen was standing in the shadows cast by a lume-strip shining through a walkway. He was motionless, his servo-arms folded behind his back. He might have been an empty suit of armour but for the intensity of the red glow behind his eye lenses. He was standing beside the access hatch to a boarding torpedo. Ba'birin felt another wave of unease as he regarded his old friend. Then he felt shame. Not because of his suspicions, but because they made him a hypocrite as he entered into the rituals that bound the Salamanders to each other and to their cause.

It was almost a relief when, with the blaring of klaxons, war came early.



CHAPTER TWO

There were glories to war, and there were curses. The greatest curse, as far as Mulcebar was concerned, was the madness that attended it. It was not battle itself that was madness. What was mad was the contingencies of action and perversities of fate that forced a commander to issue orders that he knew to be foolish. So it was now. He was going to close with the orks. He was committing himself to an action he would decry as the height of stupidity in any other circumstance. And he was hurling his company into a suicidal confrontation in order to rescue a single eldar. Some of his more mystically inclined fellow officers might see the compounding ironies as a sign of fate. Perhaps they were right. He had no interest in working out the philosophical niceties of his war. But as he launched an assault that had nothing to do with pragmatism and everything to do with an idealistic, death-or-glory charge, he took solace in the fact that it was not naïveté but duty that forced his hand. He would not mourn any warriors who fell in the performance of duty. He would honour their deaths, and accept his own, but regret and sorrow were the province of the weak and the faithless. This battle, here, now, in all of its madness, was the new anvil upon which Fifth Company would be tested, and if this were the path drawn by Vulkan that would lead the company to its destiny, then Mulcebar welcomed it. He also blessed the efforts of the White Scars and the Raven Guard that had lured the Overfiend into the open, and so made this test a reality. The task that loomed was formidable; without the blows struck by the other Chapters, it would have been impossible.

But though the Salamanders would be shaped against the anvil, they would also be a hammer themselves.

‘Full ahead,’ Mulcebar ordered. ‘Prioritise fire on the escorts.’

The *Verdict of the Anvil* lunged forwards from the darkness of the void, plasma engines flaring, their nova brilliance a roar of challenge to the ork ships. The

greenskins responded in kind, and war rushed to meet the strike cruiser. The *Verdict* closed at a right angle to the course of the squadron. On the tacterium screens, Mulcebar had a last look at the flank of the kroozer, a massive target begging for the judgement of the nova cannon, and then shifted his focus to the escorts. The smaller ships were peeling away from their charge. There were six of them, their guns already flashing though they were not yet within range.

‘Approaching ork escort ships,’ a servitor intoned. It was slaved to the long-range augurs. ‘Three pairings. Designations: Onslaught, Ravager, Brute.’

Technical data appeared on Mulcebar’s screens. It was unnecessary. The names had told him what he needed to know, and the comparisons between the ork forces and the *Verdict*’s strength were clear in his mind. The *Verdict* was faster than all the enemy ships except the Brutes. It had better shields. It was so much more manoeuvrable than the kroozer that it could dance circles around its foe. But it could not do the same to the escorts. The Onslaughts and the Ravagers were clumsy ships, but they could still turn faster than the *Verdict*. Then there were the Brutes. They were fast, agile, and they rammed.

Still, it was the kroozer that represented the orks’ biggest advantage. Not because it was solid as a greenskin’s skull and could absorb horrific damage, but because Mulcebar could not attack and destroy it.

‘Ten seconds to range,’ the gunnery officer reported.

Ten seconds had left Mulcebar to decide his opening strategy. He didn’t need them. There was only one path to follow. The Salamanders had to board the ship. Now. So the attack would be as risky as it would be savage: blast through the escorts, launch the boarding torpedoes on a near approach to the kroozer, then withdraw and shadow.

Simple.

He doubted the orks would cooperate.

‘Maintain full ahead,’ Mulcebar ordered. ‘Prow cannons, fire on Ravagers. Port and starboard batteries, prepare for flanking attacks.’

The ships reached firing range. The flashes from the enemy were now true threats, and the *Verdict of the Anvil* answered the orks with its own fury. The forward bombardment cannons opened up. The ram ships were already swinging wide for their attack runs, but the other ork ships flew into the teeth of the Salamanders’ monstrous ordnance, either trusting in the strength of their shields, or too single-minded to think of evading. The leading Ravager was the first sacrifice on the altar of war. It was in the process of launching a massive torpedo salvo when the *Verdict*’s fire hit. The chain of explosions was immense. For a

few moments, the ship became a comet, its momentum granting the flaming mass a strange coherence. Then even larger blasts from what had been ammunition bays spread the wreckage wide, forcing its companion ships off their direct course.

One of the Onslaughts had been coming on too hard on the Ravager's heels. The attack ship was an awkward beast: merciless in a direct assault, with formidable forward shields and batteries, but with the manoeuvrability of a sauroch in mud. It rose up, flying above the worst of the boiling gases, exposing its vulnerable belly to the *Verdict's* guns. The strike cruiser's bombardment raked the Onslaught, tearing through useless shields and cracking the ork ship open like an egg. The Onslaught disintegrated, littering the void with metal fragments and tumbling, flash-frozen corpses.

The second Ravager swerved to port, then returned to its course. Its racks of torpedoes fired. They came at the *Verdict of the Anvil* in an undisciplined swarm. Mulcebar saw premature detonations, erratic flight paths, even outright collisions. But there were so many, too many. The orks were geniuses of quantity. It didn't matter how imprecise their technology was. If they hurled enough spears at their target, some were bound to hit.

The *Verdict's* side batteries lit the void with a hellish shield of explosions. They created a net of plasma and las, missiles and beams, a net of destruction to catch and exterminate any ship or projectile that dared approach. But there were too many.

'Port, thirty degrees,' Mulcebar called, and the *Verdict* began its turn into the torpedo salvo, reducing its profile. The impact warning sounded, whooping through the four-kilometre length of the ship. Three torpedoes slammed into the prow. The first was a dud, flattening itself against the shields. The other two exploded within less than a second of each other, embracing the bow of the ship in a blossom of flame. The void shields crackled, flaring bright with the overload, and flickered. The weakness was brief, but it was just long enough. Another torpedo struck the port side. The hull shook. Crimson runes cascaded across the tacterium screens. Mulcebar took them in, seeing cause for both relief and concern. There were no breaches. But an entire rack of port batteries had taken a direct hit and been destroyed. There was a gap in the ship's defences now.

The remaining turrets blazed hell at the Ravager, while the prow cannons sought out the remaining Onslaught. Mulcebar looked for the Brutes, and saw the two ramming ships beginning their attack, one on each flank. He couldn't

evade or outrun them. There might have been a slim chance of foiling the charge of one, but now an inescapable pincer was closing around the *Verdict*. The hope was to shatter the claws before they could meet with the flesh of the ship.

‘Side batteries, target ram ships,’ Mulcebar said. ‘Helmsmaster, take us down.’ The strike cruiser began as sharp a plunge as a beast its size could manage. The prow dropped below the plane of the engagement. The Brutes adjusted and continued to close. The Onslaught was slower. It had been weathering the storm of the *Verdict*’s barrage through a combination of speed, counter-measures and sheer, brutal resilience. Its own firepower was pressing the *Verdict*’s void shields hard. Now its las and missiles passed over the *Verdict*’s prow. The hits were more glancing, over a wider area of shield, and for a precious second, Mulcebar’s gunners again had a direct shot on an ork ship’s weaker armour. They took it. The cannon gutted the Onslaught. The colossal ordnance slammed deep into the belly of the ship and exploded, tearing the vessel in half. Its pieces tumbled end over end through the void, trailing gas and wreckage.

The Ravager was passing port and aft. In the last second before it moved beyond the arc of the remaining batteries, a lance struck its engines. The port side of the torpedo boat flashed like the death of a sun, then gouted red flame and ugly smoke. The ship spun into a drunken spiral, and a few seconds later the glare of its starboard engines went dark. Intact but drifting, the Ravager fell into the dark of the void. The oily flames of its wound were the receding marker of its existence.

Four ships down, and the length of the war could still be counted in seconds. Four kills, but Mulcebar didn’t allow himself to feel any satisfaction. It was the nature of all war, and especially void war, for crushing victory to become final defeat on a second’s whim of fate. The ramming ships were still coming for the *Verdict*. The strike cruiser was injured, and it hadn’t even begun its run at the kill kroozer. ‘Kill those Brutes!’ he shouted. He could feel the fate of the mission, and then of millions of souls, balancing on the cusp of the next few moments.

The starboard batteries set the heavens ablaze with turret- and missile-fire. Lances seared the dark, reaching for their agile, speeding target. Brutes were vessels designed for but a single function, but it was an act so completely at one with the ork character that there was a raw, ugly brilliance to their design. The prow accounted for over a third of a Brute’s length. It was an enormous, serrated knife blade, and every bolt, every rivet, every scrap of metal of the ship was in the service of that blade. The vessels were armoured not to withstand enemy fire but so they could hit harder. Their engines were better than those of other escort

ships. They were faster and more manoeuvrable. And all of these strengths were conceived so that the Brute could fulfil its simple, crude destiny: to smash into another ship at high speed and rend it asunder. It was a crewed torpedo a thousand metres long.

Its size, however, meant that it could not evade fire forever, no matter how swift and agile it was. The pincer closed, the ram ships barrelled in, and on the starboard flank, the lances reached out, grasped and burned. Their target had been acquired. Energy concentrated into beams of destruction incarnate sliced deep into its core. Its engines blew, and though it was as if a dwarf star had gone nova in close proximity to the *Verdict of the Anvil*, the wash of superheated gases over the struggling void shields was a soft caress compared to the blow the Brute had so eagerly promised. The shock wave slammed into the strike cruiser. The *Verdict* yawed like a log in an angry river. The hull groaned.

That was to starboard. But to port...

Even as the lances were striking their quarry, Mulcebar was calling for a hard turn to port. The portside Brute had found the gap in the strike cruiser's fire arc and was storming forwards. The turn was a desperate gambit to change the *Verdict*'s orientation and bring weaponry to bear on the ork ship-killer. Mulcebar had seen grand cruisers have their backs broken by the blow of a Brute. Now the *Verdict*'s hull did not just groan, it shrieked the agony of torque as the roll, the turn and the drive forwards unleashed warring physical forces. The movement was fast for a cruiser, and it was tortuously slow.

'Brace for impact,' Mulcebar ordered. The shriek of the klaxons climbed in pitch and rhythm.

And there, with the seconds draining away, the Brute appeared in the sights of one of the port batteries. Missiles streaked to intercept the ram ship. It was so close, and so big, that its speed was no longer a factor. The rockets couldn't miss.

They didn't. Projectiles a hundred metres long struck the Brute head-on. The punch of their mass was fused with the fury of their explosives. On the bridge, the portside oculiport flashed crimson from the detonation.

The tacterium screen to Mulcebar's right displayed the pageantry of destruction. The Brute emerged from the heart of the explosion. It was battered and rocked by secondary blasts. It had been knocked off course, and was skewing towards the *Verdict* at an oblique angle. It had been slowed. As flames plumed from all parts of the ork ship, it was hard to tell if its engines were still working, or even if it were still being piloted.

In the end, Mulcebar was looking at minor blessings. The vicious prow, though damaged, was not gone. The ship had not been destroyed. Collision was inevitable.

The Brute hit. It dragged itself along the midship flank, gouging the *Verdict* open. The impact shook the entire length of the ship with the force of an earthquake. Mulcebar kept his feet, but servitors and human crew were thrown down. He felt the wound reach into the heart of his ship. Then the Brute revealed itself to be a dying beast and it was burst apart by an internal blast. Its end was its final curse on the *Verdict* as it fed its flames into the gaping breach, infecting the cruiser with an immolating disease. The fever raced through corridors, leaping past shredded bulkheads. Power flickered and wavered. The overloaded void shields collapsed.

The runes on the tacterium screens tumbled over each other in a litany of disaster. Each was a different message of woe, but together they spoke a single word: doom.

Mulcebar cursed as the containment mechanisms failed and the fire spread its wings.

In the torpedo room, the battle was experienced as sound and movement, punctuated by fragmentary glimpses through oculiports. The sounds were an oratorio of machine rage. An immense choir of booms was punctuated by the strobing of energy weapons and the shrieks of metal. When the Brute struck, it was as if Mount Deathfire had erupted in the heart of the ship. Seismic pain shook the walls and floor, and the sound was so gigantic that it blotted out thought.

The initial impact passed, but the hull continued to tremble with smaller explosions. A constant vibration hummed through the walls, and something distant but terrible murmured through the ventilation system. Ha'garen recognised the voice of fire. Beneath his feet, the injured ship quivered.

At the far end of the torpedo room was a maintenance console. Ha'garen ran to it. Mechadendrites extended from his neck and plugged themselves in beneath the screen. The console was designed to monitor and service the atmospheric conditions local to the room itself, and nothing more, but it was still a conduit to the entire nervous system of the ship. Ha'garen's consciousness became one with the *Verdict of the Anvil*. He had been aware of the anguish of the vessel's machine-spirit before, but now its wailing of anger and pain was overwhelming, and for a moment it filled his entire existence. A tiny portion of his mind noted

that his body was uttering a litany of calming, and he channelled the power of the ritual directly into the ship's soul. Though the machine-spirit's agony did not diminish, its frenzy abated just enough for Ha'garen to see and think clearly.

He took in the damage and the growth of the fire, traced the path it would follow, and evaluated the options in the same fractions of a second that he had trained to read a battlefield. The wound along the port flank was long and deep, and its effects spread far beyond the actual gap in the hull. The integrity of electrical and life-sustaining systems was badly compromised. The ship could be saved. Power could be stabilised and routed to engines, shields and weapons. Most of the *Verdict of the Anvil* would still be able to support life. It could still be the Emperor's might and Vulkan's wrath, and it could still complete its mission. *Could*. But all these things would become possible only through immediate, drastic action. If the *Verdict* were not saved in the next few seconds, it would not be saved at all.

There was precisely one option: amputation.

The fire roared through the passageways of the ship, gorging on combustibles. Servitors were incinerated at their posts and as they plodded along their dutiful paths. Some writhed, their nerve endings reacting to the burn even while their brains remained as oblivious to their deaths as to their lives. The sentient crew – serfs, grunts, officers, technicians, priests – fled before the flames, but the fire outpaced them and ran them down, devouring the oxygen they needed to scream as their flesh blackened to crisp ash. Salamanders caught by the inferno survived inside their armour, but there was nothing they could do for the humans, some of whom turned, in their final moments, with pleading arms outstretched to the gods who had suddenly been found wanting. Bulkhead doors dropped, automatically triggered to seal off the damaged area. The attempt was failing. Too many frames had been twisted out of true. There were too many alternate paths for the fire to take. It found them all. It was a lightning cancer flashing through the arteries and organs of the ship.

Fore and aft of the fire, well beyond the damage wrought by the Brute, in zones structurally sound, regions that were still refuges, massive doors closed, locked, sealed. Here, the frames were perfect. The barriers were absolute. Many crew members saw the doors shut. More than a few guessed what was about to happen.

An exterior voice intruded on Ha'garen's focus. It was Ba'birin's. 'Brother, what

are you doing?’ His hand was on Ha’garen’s shoulder. Information about the grip and its pressure reached Ha’garen’s mind as pure data. He did not feel the tug. His awareness of his physical self had been reduced to information, and was no more visceral than the electrical impulses down which his identity travelled and through which he acted. He redirected enough of his self to answer Ba’birin.

‘I am acting to save the ship,’ he said.

‘There are large numbers of active personnel signals in those sealed areas.’

The monitor, Ha’garen realised, must be displaying what he was calling up. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘We must extract them,’ Ba’birin insisted.

‘We cannot,’ Ha’garen said. He completed the procedure.

Explosive bolts fired, blowing wide hatches and doors. Valves burst open. Across a third of the length of the *Verdict of the Anvil*, the ship opened itself to the void. Its atmosphere was stripped away, sucked out with a burst of smoke, oil and flame, and puffs of water crystal. The fire was robbed of its breath in an instant. So were the trapped humans. Their deaths were quick but agonised. Their jaws widened, desperately grasping for the absent air. Some held their breath, and their lungs exploded. They were, perhaps, the fortunate ones. The others remained conscious longer. They had time, so much time, ten eternal chrono-ticks to know what was happening to them, to suffer the foretaste of hell and understand that there would be no rescue. They had not been abandoned. They had been sacrificed. Tick, and tick, and tick, and their chests heaved with the effort to fill empty lungs. Their muscles locked, and then began to convulse. Water vapour expanded and their bodies swelled, and still the unlucky ones did not pass out. When they did, their bodies lived on for more than a minute.

Some of the dead were sucked from the ship by the decompression. Most remained where they fell. Ha’garen had killed the atmosphere but not the gravity. The bodies in their thousands would wait for disposal. They were a carpet of dead matter.

But the fire was out, killed as quickly as the humans. The *Verdict’s* machine-spirit calmed.

Ha’garen withdrew from the ship’s being. He retracted his mechadendrites. Ba’birin was staring at him, horror etched deeply into his obsidian features.

‘In Vulkan’s name, what have you done?’ the sergeant whispered.

‘I preserved the ship.’ Ha’garen was not boasting. He was speaking a simple truth.

‘You have killed thousands of fellow Nocturneans.’

‘I saved many thousand more.’ He wasn’t trying to defend himself. He was simply giving Ba’birin all the information.

‘And there was no other alternative? You acted without thinking.’

‘That is not true.’ Ha’garen had examined every possible course of action, and had chosen the best alternative. When he was part of the machine circuit, his thoughts were quicksilver lightning. He had weighed the costs of his action carefully. He knew exactly what he had done, down to the last tortured serf. He also knew precisely what the cost would have been if he had done nothing, or even waited a few more seconds.

Ba’birin shrugged, not convinced. ‘Remember the human, brother,’ he said as he turned away. ‘If you forget, you will kill us all.’

Mulcebar read the tally of casualties and damage. The numbers were grim, but could so easily have been worse. A large area of the ship was sealed off and would remain so until the *Verdict* could return to Prometheus and dry-dock for repairs. But the ship could pursue. It could fight. It was responding to commands from the bridge once more. Its machine-spirit was snarling softly, eager for retaliation.

There was a mission to complete.

‘Bring us back to our pursuit heading,’ Mulcebar said. When the helmsmaster nodded, the captain added, ‘Get me that ork.’

The *Verdict of the Anvil* was wounded, but not hobbled, not crippled. The predator could still hunt, and the duty of the Salamanders was now twinned with the ship’s thirst for vengeance. A rage for the wounds and for the dead permeated the walls of the vessel, and Mulcebar wasn’t sure if he was feeling his own anger and that of his men, or picking up the *Verdict*’s own fury. Perhaps there was no distinction to be made. The engines flared the searing white of that fury, and the *Verdict* powered forwards, building momentum as it closed on its prey.

The prey that it must not kill. The prey against which it could use little more than speed and void shields. And a lethal injection of warriors.

The kill kroozer had put some distance between itself and the *Verdict*. Though the battle with the escort had been brief, there would have been time for the flagship to reverse course and engage with its wounded enemy. Mulcebar was surprised that it had not. He was also concerned. For orks to avoid, or at the very least ignore, an obvious scrap, they had to be focused on something else that was

extraordinarily compelling. Some lure, whether instinct, intuition or perverse chance, was calling that ship onwards. He wondered again about the secret the Salamanders were chasing. Did the orks know what was enhancing their planetside forces? He thought not. But it didn't matter, if the mere existence of this power was enough to draw them on.

The *Verdict* gained, but slowly. The speeds of the two ships were almost identical. Urgency and rage granted the strike cruiser just enough of an edge to close with its prey. Every moment saw the ork monster drive deeper into the system, and the window for the mission close a little bit more.

Then Mulcebar saw an adjustment in the kroozer's course. It was beginning a starboard turn. 'Got your attention at last,' he muttered. The enemy ship was coming around to meet them with its heaviest guns and strongest shields. 'Helmsmaster,' he said aloud, 'let us give the greenskins what they are clearly wanting. Set course to meet their turn.' He opened a channel to the torpedo deck. 'Boarding party, prepare for launch.'

The *Verdict* began a starboard correction as well, moving on a diagonal to its original heading. The lumbering kroozer finished its turn. A hook-jawed leviathan, it surged forwards to meet its rival. The two predators closed with each other, one eager to devour, the other intent on purging its opponent from within. When the kroozer's guns began their bombardment, Mulcebar stifled the impulse to respond in kind. 'Evasive manoeuvres,' he ordered. 'Get us within range, helmsmaster. Batteries open fire. Target only the enemy's turrets.'

Phanes took the *Verdict* to port and down. Against an attack ship, the move would have been pointless. Against the beast that was the kroozer, the *Verdict*'s agility was blinding. Some of the ork shots hit, but most went wild. The void shields held. The kroozer's turrets spun, fighting to reacquire their target. The *Verdict*'s batteries blazed at the kroozer. The show of firepower was spectacular, but barely more dangerous than a fireworks display as the *Verdict*'s targeting concentrated on turrets and the thickest shielding. A few of the ork guns were silenced. There were plenty more, and as the vessels drew nearer to one another, it became impossible for the orks to miss. The barrage pressed the *Verdict*'s shields hard. 'Torpedo decks,' Mulcebar voxed. 'Status.'

'Ready for launch,' Ba'birin's voice came back.

The ships were upon each other. 'Do it now,' Mulcebar told Phanes.

The helmsmaster straightened the *Verdict*'s course. The two behemoths slid by each other, unleashing hellish broadsides. The *Verdict* took strong hits on the port side. Most of the ork shells struck the damaged area, but Ha'garen had

quarantined it so completely from the rest of the ship that a few more gaping rents in the hull were beneath notice. The *Verdict*'s own guns still fired to spectacular effect, causing only minor damage but blinding the enemy's eyes with constant las and plasma flashes. The blaze of ordnance was cover. In the midst of the exchange of fire, while the ships passed the length of each other like ancient, three-masted privateers, the boarding torpedoes launched.

Mulcebar watched them go as Phanes shot the *Verdict of the Anvil* out of the kroozer's range. The kroozer tried to turn around, but by the time it did, the Salamanders would be well under way. There was no catching up possible.

The torpedoes had almost reached their target when a servitor announced, 'Contact.'

Mulcebar looked at his own screens. He saw no other ships in the vicinity. 'Is there any confirmation?' he called out.

An officer had run to the servitor's augury station. She looked at the screen, then back up at Mulcebar. 'Nothing,' she said. 'Perhaps an anomaly caused by the damage.'

Mulcebar frowned, dissatisfied. 'Keep watch,' he ordered. 'Inform the boarding party.'

Minor explosions erupted in the kroozer's flank. They were close together, a concentrated burst of two pinpricks. They were the sparks of Vulkan's hammer striking the anvil, bringing the war to the orks.



CHAPTER THREE

The boarding torpedo was a blunt instrument whose uses were as varied as they were sophisticated. Though it was crewed and had enough fuel and engine power for limited manoeuvres over short distances, its action was still one of the most basic of warfare. It was a projectile. It was an object launched to hit other objects as hard as possible. Its uniqueness among other projectiles, its sophistication, came in the fact that it caused most damage after its initial impact as the living weapons it carried stormed the passageways of its target. From that uniqueness sprang its versatility. Should the strikes concentrate on a single entry point or be spread out, engaging the enemy on multiple fronts? Hit from one side for a spear-point thrust, or from both flanks, trapping the foe in a ceramite fist? The answer depended on the ship and the objective. Was the vessel a known quantity whose layout could be factored into planning? Was the objective one of total annihilation or more surgical?

This ship was unknown. It was the creation of a species whose approaches to technology were in equal measures crude and enthusiastic.

And the mission was grotesque.

But there *was* a mission, and so there was a strategy. The mission was search and rescue through hostile, alien territory. The strategy was the use of a concentrated, mobile force. And so the boarding torpedoes drove into the centre of the kroozer's port flank.

For Ha'garen, the line between machine and flesh was blurry at best. There were times when he saw no distinction at all. Was there an essential difference between his mechanistic implants and prostheses, and the organs that had transformed him into a Space Marine? He didn't think so. The hands of the Mechanicus hovered over both. Neither was natural. What, beyond the medium of construction, distinguished his eyes that saw radiation above and below the

wavelengths of visible light from the neuroglottis that broke taste and smell down into component, identifiable parts? Nothing. Flesh and metal, bone and ceramite, the physical was the physical. The body was the body.

So when the vulcan-drills of the boarding torpedoes parted metal, they were parting flesh. The torpedoes were blades sinking into the body of a living enemy, and then sealing the entry wound. There was nothing of mercy in the healing; it merely permitted the deeper, more lethal wounds that would be inflicted subsequently by the transported Salamanders. There was an aesthetic to this form of attack, a perfect fusion of the organic and inorganic in form and function that he found pleasing. The very act of waging war in this fashion was a tribute to the Omnissiah. The focus of the hammer blow was an obeisance to Vulkan. And the war itself was a sacrament to the Emperor. There was a trinity of worship simply in the manner in which the squads had arrived on the ork ship. This simple truth was so clear, it was a wonder it was not visible to all. But he did not need to see Ba'birin's face beneath his helmet to know that the lesson was lost on him. Ha'garen could read distrust in the microscopic changes in the other Space Marine's posture whenever Ha'garen was in his field of view.

There was more than distrust. There was anger, running deep. Ba'birin still did not see the necessity of what Ha'garen had done on the *Verdict of the Anvil*. He saw Ha'garen disregarding any consideration of the flesh in his effort to save the machine. He was wrong. Ha'garen's judgement was sound.

Are you sure? What are you?

The Salamanders disembarked in a large cargo bay. The ceiling was high, like those of the *Verdict*, but there was none of the Imperial ship's majesty here. The walls did not rise to ribbed vaults that lifted the eyes in awe. Instead, there was an irregularity to the space that offended the Techmarine. There was a morality for the constructed, and there was none in evidence here. The walls were of different heights, varying by as much as a metre even on a single side of the room. The ceiling dipped and sagged overhead like an iron tarpaulin. Worst of all, Ha'garen couldn't shake the sense of grotesque improvisation. The space's function was the result of chance and opportunism. It was not big because it was a cargo bay. It happened to be big, and so it was a cargo bay.

He was disgusted, in the sense that every bit of technical data streaming to his consciousness revealed their surroundings as corrupted. Not by Chaos, but by incompetence. He was not surprised. This first glimpse of the interior of the ship matched what he had seen of the exterior during the torpedo's approach. Though the kroozer had an impressive, bestial solidity to it, there was little overall

planning to its design. Its shape, not unlike an elongated ork's skull, was not produced by careful design. It was the inevitably ramshackle work of many hands guided by single-minded aggression. The greenskins could not help but produce a machinic embodiment of themselves: brutish, stupid, ferociously dangerous and hard to kill. There was no system, no logic to the construction. There was only instinct.

The Salamanders were surrounded by vehicles in various states of construction, disassembly and experimentation. Some looked intact, awaiting the signal to deploy. Others had been dissected, seemingly by a drunk and blind butcher. Engines had been removed and scavenged with no thought as to how they might be replaced. Wheels, tracks, chassis, weapon mounts and unidentifiable scrap littered the floor, some in mounds that rose higher than the intact vehicles. The scene was an engineering disgrace. But for all the heaped junk and parts, for all the haphazard placement of the transports, bikes and tanks, there was also menacing force. The ork way of war was sloppy, and at first glance seemed alien to any recognisable concept of strategy. But it was devastatingly effective. For every vehicle in pieces, there was one ready for battle, and another being rebuilt into something even more deadly. And there were numbers. In this single cargo bay, stacked and parked any which way, there was enough transport and heavy support to annihilate an entire company of Imperial Guard.

The space was lit by guttering glow-globes. Light a shade of filth and rust slicked the room, glinting dully off metal. The vehicles and scrap piles cast jagged shadows. Some of the shadows moved.

Orks had been at work when the torpedoes burst through the hull. Several had been pulverised by the vulcan-drills. The others had regrouped at the far end of the bay and were charging forwards, roaring with anger that intruders had invaded their territory, and with delight that an unexpected scrap was at hand. They came in a straight line, a wave of snarling barbarism, leaping over obstacles that might have served as cover in their eagerness to reach the Space Marines and start the killing.

The Salamanders obliged. They didn't seek cover any more than did the orks. 'Brothers!' Ba'birin called out. 'Purge the savage greenskins from the sight of the Emperor! Let them feel the fire of Vulkan's judgement!'

'Into the fires of battle!' Neleus cried.

'Unto the Anvil of War!' the squads chorused. Ha'garen unleashed the battle cry with as much force as any, his vocal cords grating from the unusual strain.

He rarely raised his voice above a monotone now, relying almost exclusively on his helm vox-caster to deliver the volume he needed, whether in discussion with his battle-brothers or reciting liturgical verse over a damaged machine. But in this moment, in this surging birth of battle, he was a Space Marine above all else, and the passion he felt for war surprised him in its fire.

The fight had been too long in coming. Anticipated while the other Chapters carried out their missions, held off again while the void-ships engaged in their lethal dance, its glory tainted by the nature of the mission, the struggle was nothing as simple as a military tactic. It was a need, a reaffirmation of nobility and purpose.

And a battering ram of vengeance.

The Salamanders marched into battle. They were a steady, measured, implacable advance. They were a fist of ceramite, flame and bolter-fire. Neleus and Ba'birin led the two squads as a single whole, twenty Salamanders moving forwards like an adamantine piston. Both sergeants carried combi-flamers. They formed the blunt end of a terrible spear, and fanned a spread of burning promethium before them. Fuel drums and pools of spilled chemicals ignited with the ferocious *whoosh* of a sudden gale. The orks poured into the fire. The front ranks were consumed. The mob coming up from behind pushed over the bodies and broke over the rock of the Fifth Company. The Salamanders continued their advance, hammering the orks. They husbanded their ammunition. They knew they would be needing it the further into the ship they drove, wading into a sea of orks. They used the initial blast of bolter-fire to complement the wash of flame. A horizontal, explosive hail turned the greenskin charge into a storm of rancid meat. Through the storm came still more orks, laughing at the spectacle of their fellows' deaths even as they hurled guttural curses at the Space Marines. The momentum of their rush, though, was lost. They couldn't simply bound over vehicles. They had to avoid flaming slicks and red-burning wrecks. They had to fight past their twitching, near-dead comrades and tangling stumbles of the barely-more alive. The single-minded tenacity of the orks kept them coming when a lesser foe would have been exterminated, but even a slight bleed-off of speed and energy was enough for the Salamanders to exploit.

Mag-locking projectile weapons to their thighs, they moved into close combat with chainsword, gladius and fist. Ha'garen brought up the rear. His servo-arms smashed flanking greenskins to the ground with metronomic rhythm while he gutted enemies to the front. His burst of excitement had faded, giving way once again to an intense, cold-blooded focus. At the speed of instinct, but with the

precision of meticulous calculation, he evaluated each second for maximum damage to the enemy. He slew the orks with a methodical brutality that would have made even his cautious, pre-Mars self chafe with boredom. His new incarnation was not bored. He experienced no tedium. Instead, he was engaged in the deliberate crafting of the perfect ork kill. It was, in its way, a form of art, the only kind that he could still recognise.

The Salamanders battered their way to the entrance of the cargo bay. They reached the raised gate and began to run out of orks. They turned around and mopped up. The remaining monsters did not give up. They fought as hard, and with as little fear, as they had at the beginning of the struggle. But then they were dead, and for a few moments there was silence. Or as close to it as could be experienced on an ork ship. There was no true silence in such a place. The throb of the engines made the filth-encrusted iron walls vibrate as if from the grunts of a giant beast. Snaking, creaking pipes and conduits carried the echoes of snarls, blows and screams. Some of the screams could have been the squeals of poorly slaughtered animals. Others surely were the agonised howls of breaking slaves. Still more might have been either.

The squads moved into the wide corridor outside the cargo bay. It stretched a good distance fore and aft before dropping into gloom. It was wide enough for four Space Marines to march abreast, and Ha'garen pictured it feeding vast numbers of orks to the various flank bays, whose openings were so many gaping maws along the passageway's length. Narrower corridors, tributaries to a major river, ran off the main hallway. From what little Ha'garen could see, they twisted, angled and crossed each other in a hopelessly tangled metal labyrinth. They made a mockery of the logical, strategic function of the principle artery.

The Salamanders formed a defensive semi-circle, covering all approaches. Ba'birin and Neleus turned to Ha'garen. 'Any ideas?' Neleus asked.

'We can hardly go exploring,' Ba'birin said. His tone was cold, accusatory, as if Ha'garen had suggested just such a lunatic plan of action. Ba'birin was right, though. Slightly longer and broader than the *Verdict of the Anvil*, the kroozer was the size of a small city, one whose entire population of tens of thousands would have no other thought than to wipe out the Salamanders once their presence became widely known. It was no heresy or failure of will to acknowledge that they could not take on the entire ork crew. It was madness to believe otherwise.

Past Imperial encounters with ork ships was of little help. Greenskin vessels of a given class resembled each other sufficiently in their broad lines to be recognisable as being part of that class, but in the specifics, each was its own

unique monster, shaped by the whim of its commander and the demented experimentation of his mekboyz. Relying on previously experienced layouts was just as likely to lead to dead ends and disaster as one's objective. Ha'garen might have been willing to make some educated guesses based on existing data if the Salamanders' target had been the bridge or the engine room. But they were here to find a single prisoner.

Ha'garen stepped back into the cargo bay. In the wall to the left of the gate was a large metal box. Its location was promising. So was the sound of sparks and angry hornets coming from inside. Ha'garen opened the panel. If an Imperial engineer had produced such a collection of wires, circuits and outlets, he would have been shot, had he avoided electrocution long enough to reach the firing squad. It looked like a death trap, and not a power source for the orks working on the vehicles in the bay. Sparks jumped from wires that had little or no insulation. Through his helmet's rebreather, Ha'garen picked up a powerful smell of ozone. He accepted all of this as normal. He had long ago learned to accept that ork technology worked in defiance of common sense. His mechadendrites moved towards the electrical snake pit but he hesitated before making contact, forging a mental shield from his prayers to the Omnissiah. Though he spoke the words aloud, the principle force of the ritual was internal, a ceremony between his flesh and machine, mind and spirit, a communion in that sacred place where the self was still evolving out of the fusion between Salamander and machine.

The link he was about to attempt was dangerous. He was aware of no precedent for it, nor did he even know if it was religiously sound. He had been thinking about the act and its possible consequences since Mulcebar had first assigned him to this boarding mission, and had tried to think of an alternative means of acquiring the necessary information. There was none. He thought back to the briefing, to the look Mulcebar had given him as he had saluted, arms crossed to slap chestplate, before leaving the strategium. The captain did not have an expressive face, and his look of stoic pragmatism did not change then. But Ha'garen had thought at the time, and was convinced now, that there had been a glimmer in his eye, a hint of repressed regret. He had known. He had known the step Ha'garen would have to take, but he could not let an impulse of sympathy compromise the mission, just as he had to swallow the revulsion that came with ordering the rescue of an eldar.

Duty came before self. And the self must be used in the furtherance of duty. The principles were that simple.

Simple, too was the equation that now confronted Ha'garen. Personal risk was irrelevant. The mission was crucial to the survival of far more than a local system. The eldar witch must be found. There was only one Salamander who could find him, and there was only one way to do so. With the equation solved, the reasons to hesitate evaporated like the mirages they were. Strengthened by resolve and communion with the technical purity of the Machine-God, Ha'garen linked himself to the kroozer's electrical system.

It was like stepping into a surging river of raw effluent. Ha'garen could imagine no machine realm more disgusting, unless it were one corrupted by Chaos itself, and into those waters he would not have waded, for the risk of contamination was so high. He would have doomed himself, his mission, and everyone and everything he had been trying to save. As it was, he strengthened his mental barriers of purity before he opened himself up to the full picture of debased circuitry that coursed through the ship.

The kroozer appeared to him as a pulsating line schematic. It was drawn by the currents flowing down cables and through circuits across the ship. Zones of heavy electrical use shone brightly, the lines thick with energy. Bridge, engine room and weapon systems shone like suns. Ha'garen was contemplating a three-dimensional grid in the shape of an ork kroozer. There was no matter to the vision, nothing but void between the lines, but the ship did not appear insubstantial. It was just as vicious in this incarnation as in its physical one. The flickering light-beast was a carnivore on a perpetual hunt, lashing out at the entire universe. It was energy sculpted into rage, and it was inarticulate. But though it would not speak, perhaps it could be read.

The eldar the Salamanders sought could be in three possible states. He could be dead, though they had the assurance of the Stormseer that he was not. Therefore, he was either engaged in the labour of a slave, in which case he could be almost anywhere on the ship, or he was in a cell. And if he was suffering under the greenskin lash, he would, sooner or later, be returned to his cell. That was the target Ha'garen had to identify. Slave pens would be allocated the bare minimum of energy resources. Orks being what they were, the simplest means of containing their captives would be used, likely little more than a large space in which they could toss the prisoners. Probably in the lower decks.

There. Minimal circuitry surrounding a void towards the bottom centre of the hull. Only the most sporadic tracery of electrical activity running in those bleak walls. No quick access to cargo hatches or weapon systems there. Anything kept in that space would count for very little. The area was very large, too. It could

hold thousands. He had narrowed the search, but not enough.

Ha'garen opened himself up a bit more to the ship. His awareness closed in on that large emptiness in the grid. The faint energy demands, invisible when blotted by the incandescence of the full ship, became clearer when he looked at the low-use zone in isolation. *Find one prisoner*, he told himself. *Read the electronic entrails and find one prisoner*. He scanned the entire zone multiple times before the odd detail popped out. Towards the bottom, near the prow end of the space, there was a small but constant pulse. Someone was drawing on the grid. Not a slave, but in the slave quarters. Guards, Ha'garen surmised. A small number, and in an odd spot. The location was not quite on the perimeter, where even orks would find it logical to place security for the prison as a whole. And indeed, when he pulled back for a moment, Ha'garen saw a glow that likely was the principle guard post. The other, weaker, smaller shine was inside the pen. Extra guards. For select prisoners.

Special prisoners.

An eldar seer would be very special. Orks were extremely superstitious, and an enemy who knew what they were going to do before they did would be a prize catch. They would be nervous about what he might be capable of, but also proud to have caught him. He would be an anxiety-inducing trophy. The commander who caught him would expend greater effort in keeping him alive, confined, and helpless.

Ha'garen pulled out from the ork grid. As he left the cargo bay, he felt a fading aftertaste of his link with the kroozer. It was a stuttering, background vibration in his mind and soul, and a shedding of tainted ash. The purity of his link to the Omnissiah had been compromised, and he didn't know if it could be cleansed.

He rejoined his squad. His consciousness had been away from the physical world for less than ten seconds, but even in that lapse of time, events had moved forwards. The noise of the kroozer was ramping up. Retaliation was on its way and closing in.

'Well?' Ba'birin asked.

'I have a location for the prisoner.' He filled them in.

'Well done, brother,' Neleus said.

Ba'birin was less enthusiastic. 'Is this a certainty or a surmise?'

'A surmise.' Ha'garen felt no shame in stating the obvious.

Ba'birin nodded towards the iron depths of the branching corridors. 'You will have Brother-Sergeant Neleus and myself rest the fate of our squads on a surmise that gives us little more to go on than "down," "centre" and "fore."'

Forgive me if I wish for something a little more concrete.'

'Don't be so churlish, brother,' Neleus put in. 'Techmarine Ha'garen has done well. He hasn't just narrowed the field of our search. He has provided us with an actual destination.'

'What of the path to it?'

'Through the bodies of orks,' Ha'garen said.

Neleus laughed. He clapped Ba'birin on the pauldron. 'Spoken like a true brother, no? And so to war!'

'And so to war,' Ba'birin repeated. There was none of Neleus's humour in his tone, but there was pure determination. Whatever distrust Ba'birin felt for Ha'garen, he was going to use the information he'd been given, and he would complete the mission.

Ha'garen asked for nothing more. Faintly, barely detectable at the back of his mind, like a half-heard voice that disappears in a crowd, came a tiny echo of regret. It served no purpose, so he ignored it.

Cacophony was heading for the Salamanders. It boomed around corners like an avalanche of boulders and swine. It was coming from all sides.

'They come to repel us, brothers!' Ba'birin thundered. 'They believe we are a threat! Let us show the greenskins how right they are, and bring war on our terms down on their skulls! Form up!' He led the way down the nearest side corridor. 'At my side, Ha'garen,' he said. 'Point us the way, if you can.'

Ha'garen could. He had paid for this ability by acquiring a taint on his soul, but yes, he could point the way.

The Salamanders moved deeper into the ship. They were a solid mass of force incarnate travelling down the corridor, one whose advance would not be stopped by so weak an obstacle as flesh and bone. The orks threw the obstacle at them anyway. The squads hit the first wave of defenders around the third bend of the passage, just as it reached an intersection with another, larger corridor. The Salamanders did not stop. Two trains collided in cramped quarters. One was ceramite and faith, the other muscle and rage. The crunch of bodies was almost loud enough to drown the howling of the orks. The Salamanders tore into their foes with chainsword and gladius. Blades dug into meat, severing arms and heads. Motors whined with hate and organs spilled onto the floor. The passageway turned into a stygian abattoir, mired in pulp and blood. The front line of the Space Marines took the initial impact of the forces, but as the Salamanders advanced, the sheer pressure and numbers of the orks squeezed xenos warriors past the sergeants. Nocturne's sons closed ranks more tightly.

Their formation became a clenched fist. There was barely room to swing a blade, but there was plenty of killing for all, and not a bolter round needed. The combat was close, personal, tactile.

Ha'garen's servo-arms reached over his head, striking down to crush skulls with their vice grips. He stabbed forwards with his combat blade through armour, deep into an ork's gut. Then he cut upwards, slitting the beast open. As it fell, he snapped his fist out, driving the next greenskin's nose into its brain. The head was dead, but the ork swung at him one more time before it fell, bouncing its axe against his shoulder. Then it was down, and Ha'garen could take another step forwards. They were wading through a green quagmire, and their progress was agonising.

The Salamanders reached the intersection. The space opened up, and there was room to swing. The bulk of the orks were storming in from the left. The path to the right was almost clear. The squads took it, mowing down the few orks in the way, grinding them to paste. 'Move,' Ba'birin exhorted, and the Salamanders did. They took the corridor at forced-march speed. Brother Ko'bin and Apothecary N'krumor, forming the rear guard, unleashed a punishing wave with their flamers, creating a temporary barricade with the ork dead. Smoke choked the passageway, filtered out by rebreathers but blinding and smothering the orks. The greenskin attack slowed, and the Salamanders gained ground.

Old instincts died hard. Ha'garen found that he had to remind himself that they were not retreating. They were not fleeing the orks. They were stabbing their blades deeper into the ship.

'We have to do better,' Ba'birin said.

He was right, Ha'garen knew. They had picked up speed, and they were moving in the right general direction, but taking corridors at random in the hope that they would lead down into the hull was not a strategy, and time was not an ally. He looked up. The ceiling was idiocy: pipes leaking steam, pipes leaking smoke, pipes dripping filth, exposed conduits, tangled cables. He accessed the memory block that held the image of the kroozer's power grid. He traced the lines leading from the Salamanders' current location to the target. He pointed to one of the cables. 'We follow that one for now,' he said. 'Three turns, down one deck. Then there will be another.'

'Another surmise?' Ba'birin asked.

'A map,' Ha'garen answered, keeping the grid visible to his mind's eye.

Ba'birin nodded once. Whatever he thought of Ha'garen's loyalty or judgement, he had stopped questioning his expertise. 'Lead us,' he said.

Ha'garen did. The Salamanders' drive gathered momentum. The Techmarine took the force from cable to cable. There was no hesitation. He had committed himself to a route, and it was beacon-clear to him. He did not know if the end of the path held what they sought – he thought it might – but he *knew* he could guide the way. He and his brothers would know the truth of his surmise, and know it soon.

Faster. The drive became a charge. The Space Marines encountered parties of orks and smashed through them with the punch of a maglev train. They left nothing recognisable in their wake. Behind them, the pursuit howled and grew, and grew. But it was not about to catch them. As he followed the grid, reading the language of energy, Ha'garen knew his way around the ship better than the orks did themselves. The Salamanders squads changed direction constantly. They plunged down one corridor, then another. They zig-zagged in three dimensions, taking left and right without pattern or rhythm, rising up a deck in order to drop more quickly down three more. They could not be anticipated. Ha'garen knew why the sounds of the pursuit were only becoming bigger, not closer: the orks kept losing track of their movements.

The Salamanders plunged deeper and deeper into the maze of the ship, deeper and deeper into its xenos obscenity. The walls and floor were caked with grime both industrial and organic. The lighting was erratic, flickering and browning out much of the time, then suddenly glaring bright. The ship's architecture remained a savage patchwork, metal welded to metal in slapdash fashion, as impossibly dense and solid as its creators. Some sections seemed unfinished, others damaged, while still others were simply littered with piles of scrap iron. Metal, whether waste, wreckage or caprice, reached from the walls or decks with jagged fangs. And everywhere, ork graffiti covered the walls and ceilings. Crude, snarling faces, clenched fists and bloody axe blades were the favourite images. Surrounding the art were scrawled slogans, many of them painted in blood. The orkish glyphs were unintelligible to Ha'garen. They did not torture eye, mind and soul in the manner of Chaos lithography. These were simply brute aggression transmuted into text.

Down. Deeper.

'Brother Ha'garen,' Neleus said, 'you must be very careful not to die, or the rest of us will never find our way out of this ship.'

'In which case we'll just have to kill it,' Ba'birin grunted.

They were, by Ha'garen's estimate, three decks up and a few hundred metres aft of the target. The path ahead would take them along a catwalk, from which

they would drop down a level and take another corridor that passed through a large open area. It frustrated Ha'garen that he could not anticipate more of the nature of the spaces before the Salamanders reached them. To know where he was going, but not what he was passing through, seemed a reckless approach. His guesses were no more than that. And he guessed that what lay ahead might be an assembly hall of some kind.

It was loud enough to be one. Even from this distance, and with the echoing hunt shaking the walls to the rear, the cacophony up ahead was deafening. The Salamanders paused. The noise before them was as rage-filled as what was behind. They might be rushing to throw themselves into the jaws of a pincer movement. After a moment, as his Lyman's ear resolved the noise into more discrete parts, Ha'garen realised that the uproar was not another ork contingent heading their way. He heard chaos, roars, weapons-fire: the sounds of battle.

'Well?' Ba'birin asked.

'That is our route,' Ha'garen pointed out.

'I feel left out,' Neleus said.

Ba'birin laughed for the first time since Mulcebar's briefing. Ha'garen felt his own lips twitch, out of practice though they now were with expressing emotion.

'The anvil calls, brothers,' Ba'birin said, and took the catwalk.

It did call, Ha'garen thought as he followed. War was what they, and all other Space Marines, had been bred to wage. Some of his brothers embraced it more fanatically than others, and some saw it as a regrettable necessity. But it defined them. They *were* war, and now battle called with its siren song, and the prosecution of their mission demanded that they answer the summons.

Down the catwalk. Over its rail. Along the corridor. Armoured boot steps bringing the beat of Vulkan's hammer to the struggle ahead. The passageway was a wide one, ending at a large double door. Ba'birin and Neleus barrelled into it and knocked it flying from its hinges. The Salamanders burst into the vast chamber. Before them was war.

Between ork and eldar.



CHAPTER FOUR

The eldar were clad in crimson armour, its hue offset by a sinuous white rune. Ha'garen pulled a designation from his memory: Saim-Hann, the same force that the White Scars and Raven Guard had encountered. He took in their weaponry. Like the Salamanders, they were conserving ammunition, primarily using their guns to crush ork skulls. But when they fired, the orks before them vaporised. Melta weapons, Ha'garen realised. He was looking at a squad of Fire Dragons. Two had fallen. There were eight remaining. One, in more ornate armour, was wielding a heavy flamer of some sort, and was a bit more free with the trigger. A ninth member of the squad wore robes over his armour and fought with a blade whose elegance and lethality shrieked its sorcerous nature.

The eldar were fighting hundreds of orks. They moved with a fluidity that should have been foreign to armour, as if they were wearing blood-red light, and were made of nothing more than thought themselves. There was a choreography to their combat, as there was to the Salamanders', but it was very different in its nature. The Salamanders worked together with the precision of a finely tuned engine of destruction. There was something of the machine in their synchrony, for which Ha'garen gave thanks. The Techmarine knew very little of the arts outside of warfare and its monumental representations, but he knew that they existed – perhaps more in Ultramar, where life wasn't perpetually on the knife edge of extinction. The movement of the eldar was, he felt instinctively, of a kind with those other arts. The rhythms weren't the unvarying pulse of machinery. They were syncopated, complex, unpredictable. As unknowable as the race itself. Alien. Ha'garen knew that he was seeing a method of warcraft that was beautiful in and of itself. He did not like it.

Still, it was remarkable. But though the eldar were dropping orks by the dozens, it was insufficient. The Fire Dragons were doomed.

The space was an arena. Concentric circles of seating descended steeply to a pit not much more than ten metres in diameter. The Salamanders had entered behind the top row of benches. Their goal was a gated tunnel at one end of the pit. The logic of the path Ha'garen had chosen now became clear to him. The arena was used for gladiatorial combat between slaves. The surface of the pit was deep in the stew of corpses, human and otherwise, in every stage of dismemberment and decomposition. The slaves would be herded in from the tunnel to fight to the death. Ha'garen did not know if they were given weapons. He suspected they were not.

The barbarism was irrelevant. He filed it away. What mattered now was that the tunnel would lead to the slave pens, and to their target.

There was almost a full second during which a decision hovered. The Salamanders saw a clash of enemies. One was a plague upon the galaxy. The other was a particular curse upon Nocturne. The decision was not whether to interfere in the conflict, and it was not whether to attack one side or the other. The question was whether to kill both as they fought their way to the tunnel.

The eldar were clustered about three-quarters of the way down the slope. They appeared to be trying to reach the pit too. They were bogged down. They were a force that would be fearsome in confined quarters, but in the open, they were vulnerable. The orks were upon them in a flood. From the top of the arena, Ha'garen could even see currents and eddies in the rampage of the greenskins.

The second, and truly it was a *full* second, passed. The orks on the upper levels turned to welcome the Salamanders with open arms and hacking blades. Ba'birin said, 'Slay the greenskins. Do not fire on the eldar.'

The decision was a sound one, in keeping with the objectives of the mission. And like the mission itself, it rankled. There was too much history, and it was too dark, for things to be otherwise. But the Salamanders accepted the test, and vented their wrath on the orks.

Numerous as the brutes were, there was room to fight in the arena. Room to shoot, and room to swing a weapon properly. Ba'birin and Neleus struck first, once more leading by burning the plan of attack into the flesh of the enemy. They opened with a flamer blast, their promethium jets bathing the closest ranks of orks. The brutes turned into wailing, stumbling torches. They fell back against their kin, spreading the pain like a burning ripple over a pond of green scum. Straight ahead, a path through scorched bodies opened up. The Salamanders stormed into the breach. Ha'garen built on the opening move. He advanced, between the two sergeants. His servo-arms swung forwards, then out, crushing

ribcages and smashing spines. His shoulder-mounted flamer fired, incinerating the orks that were trying to charge up the gap. More bodies, more collateral burns. But still more greenskins were rushing forwards over their flaming dead. Ha'garen didn't think there was any other race, barring the tyranids, who were so completely unafraid of death. The orks' fears were far more irrational, and would take much more than the wholesale slaughter of their own to invoke.

He would show them how wrong they were not to fear the Salamanders.

He took another two steps forwards, brandishing his chainaxe. He had the high ground. He dropped down the next tier of benches and swung his weapon in a wide, horizontal stroke. It roared as if hungry. Its teeth fed on flesh, muscle and bone. It sliced deep into the chest of the leading ork as it tried to climb the riser. The top half of the beast toppled backwards while the bottom stood upright for a second after death. Ha'garen's swing side-swiped two other orks on either side of the leader, the impact sending them stumbling back. Then Ba'birin and Neleus were at Ha'garen's flanks, striking with their own chainswords. Behind them came supporting fire, bolter shells blasting greenskins to pulp.

The Salamanders descended the tiers of the arena like a lava flow from Mount Deathfire. They were flame and rock, scorching the enemy and grinding him into the filth of his own decking. They conserved ammunition by limiting themselves to sharp bursts of flamer and bolter that were just enough to make the orks reel, and then followed up with close-quarters hacking. There was no pause in their killing march, no stopping their momentum.

The orks weren't limiting themselves to blades now, but their gunfire was a weak threat. It was wild and undisciplined, and much of it wound up cutting down their own troops as they tried to close with the Space Marines. Stray rounds struck Ha'garen's armour. He ignored them.

The Salamanders advanced. They punched through the orks, and the eldar responded to the shift in the battlefield. The Fire Dragons changed their focus. No longer struggling to reach the pit, they began to make their way back up the slope of the arena. They were going to link up with the Salamanders, trapping a riot of orks between the two disciplined forces. And with that, the Salamanders were working in concert with the eldar.

Ha'garen glanced at Ba'birin. The gesture was unthought, automatic, the product of decades of habit suddenly resurfacing, a vestigial reflex that no longer meant shared battlefield cynicism. And yet... The portion of his consciousness that, since Mars, had become a process of perpetual analysis noted the reaction and tagged it for later examination. It noted, too, that Ba'birin had made the

same gesture. *Preliminary analysis: old alliances strengthened/restored in face of extraordinary new circumstances.*

Interesting, but hardly relevant. Very relevant was the most effective way of disposing of the orks before him. His flamer blast joined that of the two sergeants. Orks fell. The Salamanders were over halfway to the pit. They were closing on the eldar position.

The rockets hit the riser between the Space Marines and the eldar. The orks took the direct hit. Benches and decking blew into shrapnel. Metal torn into jagged blades whipped into the squads, along with chunks and limbs of orks. Four explosions, disorienting with skull-ringing surprise. The force of the blast staggered Ha'garen.

Momentum faltered.

Through the smoke, Ha'garen saw the eldar reeling too. He looked up. Massive, armoured orks stood at the top of the arena, spread out along its periphery. They were discarding what looked like large sticks that were smoking at one end. They were very basic, single-use rocket launchers. *So simple*, Ha'garen thought. Their effectiveness was insulting. He didn't know if the bombardment had missed its intended targets or not, but its impact shifted the strategic balance. Both parties of invaders were stunned. The orks outside the radius of the explosions were unfazed and charging.

Small, snivelling greenskins were handing new rocket sticks to their masters.

A plasma cutter was mounted on the left shoulder of Ha'garen's servo-harness. He fired it now, shearing off the arm of one of the giants. It howled in annoyance, then stared down at the ground with an expression of stupid surprise before its weapon exploded, smearing the ork and its retinue across the scorched walls. The Fire Dragons recovered at the same time and drew their fusion guns. Melta beams of an intensity that Ha'garen envied struck the other rocket-wielding orks. They vanished in a flash of heat that seemed frozen in its purity. Flamer and bolter-fire from the Salamanders drove the orks back again, but only just. Another rocket assault would have been lethal. The Space Marines and eldar were in the open. Their armour did not make them invincible.

The attack had been good tactics. The ork resistance was becoming organised. Orders were being given, orders with some thought to strategy, however crude.

Through the arena entrances came more orks, all of them brandishing heavy weapons. Too many to take down at this distance. Ha'garen saw annihilation loom ahead. Annihilation even had a shape. A gigantic silhouette appeared behind the troops, towering over all the other orks. It seemed too huge to pass

through the doorway, but on it came, a striding mountain of darkness and brawn. The allotted span for all life in the arena was measured in seconds.

The Salamanders used those seconds. So did the eldar. Flamers and fusion guns on full, ammo conservation be damned. The two forces turned as one and blasted exterminating fire down the bowl of the arena. They ran into the wake of their blasts, scorching armour. There was no pause in the wave of flame. Fuel canisters depleted as a swath of orks five metres wide vanished, replaced by charcoal and burning logs of bone. Eldar and Space Marines punched through the last of the orks like a spear-tipped battering ram. A fusion beam melted the gate. The eldar, furthest down the rise, were first into the mouth of the tunnel. The Salamanders were at their heels. Ha'garen splashed through the pit, the traces of a thousand miserable deaths crunching and splitting beneath his boots. He sensed the space above him hold its breath as something monstrous roared a command.

He plunged into the dubious shelter of the tunnel.

The very air of the arena exploded.

The rocket bombardment was an embodiment of will and totality. It was madness to use ordnance of such size, and in such quantity, inside a ship. For a moment, the sun rose behind Ba'birin. The blast wave slammed air into the tunnel like a giant fist, flattening every soul to the ground. As he fell, Ba'birin saw a Fire Dragon hurled against the wall where the tunnel bent. The eldar crumpled to the ground, a shattered doll with too many joints. Flame followed with a hollow, booming roar. Even through the protection of his helmet's rebreather, Ba'birin felt the air inside his lungs turn scorching dry. He held his breath, waiting for the worst of the fire to pass. As the oxygen in the tunnel was consumed, the fire abated. In its place came choking smoke, roiling with toxic particulates and organic ash. The world's-end thunder of the explosions faded. The aftermath was a chorus of crackling flame and groaning metal.

'Give me the count!' Neleus shouted. The Salamanders called out their names. Brother Ko'bin did not.

Ba'birin followed Neleus back to the mouth of the tunnel. Ko'bin had been caught by the blast. He was tangled in the rubble at the entrance. His armour had been reduced to slag, less by the heat than by the direct force of the explosions themselves. His body had been pierced by an assemblage of metal. Perhaps it had once been decking. Perhaps part of a wall, or some seating. Perhaps all three. It had become a missile. Now it was a sculpture, a writhing, tortured

abstraction of agony.

Neleus spoke softly. 'Look,' he said. 'Look at what he did.'

Ba'birin was confused at first. Then the meaning of Ko'bin's crucified corpse became clear. His outstretched arms and legs were not an accident of death. Ko'bin had done what he could to block the tunnel mouth with his body, absorbing fire and forming a new barrier by becoming one with debris. He had sacrificed himself to save his brothers from the worst of the explosions.

'Thank you, brother,' Ba'birin murmured. The loss was even greater than that of a single warrior. Ko'bin's progenoid glands were beyond salvaging. His genetic code was lost to the Salamanders forever. The Circle of Fire, the process of rebirth as asserted by the Promethean Creed, was broken.

They rejoined Ha'garen at the head of the formation. The Techmarine stood motionless except for the plasma cutter on his servo-harness. It traced a gentle arc back and forth as if scanning the xenos before it. The eldar had recovered. Salamanders and Fire Dragons eyed each other warily. Weapons were at ready, but not trained on targets. There was enough consciousness of shared circumstances to hold off conflict for the moment.

'Now what?' Neleus asked.

'Insight would be welcome,' Ba'birin answered.

From the destroyed arena came the first sounds of orks clambering down to investigate the results of their handiwork. The huge voice was bellowing orders again. The greenskins would be here before long.

The robed eldar stepped forwards. He glanced first at the flamer-wielding commander, and received a nod. His blade was unsheathed, but he was not brandishing it. It seemed, rather, as if the sword were as much a limb as his arms, and moved as part of the eldar's expression of self. He reeked of witch. When he spoke, his Gothic was accented but arrogantly precise, as if he were instructing the Salamanders in the use of their own language. 'Warriors of the human Emperor, greetings. I am, by name, Kaderial, and by deduction certain that we are on this ship with the same purpose.'

'And your conclusion?' Ba'birin asked.

'The urgent need for an alliance, and the need, as urgent again, to avoid conflict.' He sheathed his sword. The sudden economy of the gesture made it seem as if even keeping things simple were a luxury and an art.

The noises of the ork approach were drawing closer.

'Agreed,' Ba'birin said.

Kaderial nodded. 'I am, by joy, surprised.'

The hyperbole grated, but Ba'birin let it pass. 'We should go,' he said.

'Agreed, in turn. Shall we lead?' Without waiting for an answer, the eldar moved off with his troops.

Ba'birin gestured for the Salamanders to follow, and he marched after the eldar.

'Brother-sergeant,' N'krumor voxed over the company channel. 'Are we really?'

'We are,' Ba'birin told the Apothecary. 'Or would you rather not keep a close eye on an enemy force whose target is the same as yours?'

'A sound strategy,' Ha'garen offered.

'Thank you,' Ba'birin said, and realised that his distrust of Ha'garen had tempered. He did not understand his brother's altered way of thinking, and worried that his judgement was suspect at best. But Ha'garen was, at least, starting from a human standpoint, however far he had travelled from it. The conversation with the eldar warlock had been disconcerting. One did not talk with orks. They barely seemed to talk with each other. The only possible interaction with that race was a clash of arms. There was a comfortable simplicity, then, to their alien qualities. Orks also had but one mode of existence: attack. They were predictable. But the eldar were a hated mystery. The fact that one could communicate with some of them only compounded their disgusting otherness. This contingent was particularly off-putting. Their predilection for flame and their drake-like iconography gave them a touch of the familiar that only made them even more alien. Ha'garen strode forwards, his servo-harness turning him into a multi-limbed creature of metal. The eldar moved with grace, and their armour had a flexibility that made it seem more raiment than protection. They were entirely of the organic realm. Ha'garen was far down the path to the inorganic. He was disappearing, it seemed to Ba'birin, into the realm of the machine. He marched with clockwork precision, servo-arms flexing and grasping, shoulder mounts swivelling from target to target even as his chainaxe was angled diplomatically down. There was no trace of the flesh in his heavy, perfectly measured tread. Yet in this moment, in the presence of true xenos, he was completely human.

Eldar and Salamanders moved down the tunnel. It ran straight for a few hundred metres. There were no branches. The metalwork was so rough, it was as if the passage were a cave mined out of a mountain of iron. It was wide enough for the Space Marines to walk two abreast. Ba'birin suspected beasts sometimes chased the slaves out into the pit. There were plenty of rotting bits of bodies.

People had lost limbs in this tunnel. There were claw gouges here and there in the walls.

Neleus voxed for his ears only. 'They have their backs to us. How are they watching us?'

'You assume that they are.'

'They have to be.'

Ba'birin nodded. 'The one who spoke to us is a witch of some sort.'

'Sending one to find one. Sensible.'

'Any suggestions for what we do once we reach the prisoner?'

'Other than kill them before they kill us?' Neleus's grin was almost visible through his helmet.

'Then we agree that that should be our plan.'

'There can be no other.' Neleus sounded much less jocular.

'Brother-sergeants,' a voice interrupted. It was Berengus. He had the long-range vox equipment. 'I have received an urgent message from Captain Mulcebar.'

'I'm sure it's good news,' Neleus said.

'The Raven Guard's mission planetside has been successful,' Berengus began.

'I congratulate my brothers,' Ba'birin interrupted, 'but we already knew that, and the tactical relevance of this information—'

'Culminating in the annihilation of eldar ground forces,' Berengus finished.

'Thank you, brother,' Ba'birin said. 'Please alert the others.' He tightened his grip on his flamer, lifting the muzzle just a little bit higher, ready to stream death at a moment's notice.

'Do you think they know?' Neleus wondered.

'They must.'

'There has been no detectable broadcast since the beginning of this encounter,' Ha'garen put in as the information reached him.

'That means nothing,' Ba'birin said. 'The eldar are masters of sorcerous communication.'

'Then why aren't they attacking?' Neleus demanded.

'For the same reason we aren't.'

'The mission is paramount,' Ha'garen said, completing the thought.

The tunnel ended in a long chamber filled floor to ceiling with cages. They were rough cubes, about a metre and a half on each side. There were no platforms or walkways reaching to the upper prisons, just a tangle of rope ladders. Some of the cages were empty. Most were not. Inside the tiny boxes

were the arena participants. Ba'birin saw humans, eldar, kroot and more. There were even a few orks. This was a menagerie in which the differences between species had been all but erased. The prisoners were all feral, ravening rage and gibbering fear. He didn't hear a single intelligible word, only the whining pleas and growling threats of beasts. There was nothing to salvage here. A conflagration would be nothing less than euthanasia.

'Is our target here?' he asked Ha'garen, eyeing the advance of the eldar carefully.

The Techmarine shook his head. 'Nearby, but not part of this collection. These are not slaves. Not any longer.'

'Where, then?'

A moment passed, a tick during which Ba'birin sensed Ha'garen's consciousness vanishing into mechanistic meditation, as if he were a walking cogitator. Then he was back. 'Down another level,' he said. 'Then we look.'

Ahead, the eldar had stopped. They had spread out in a rough circle, and appeared to be focused on a section of decking. Kaderial gestured Ba'birin forwards. 'I am, by circumstance, delighted,' he said. 'Farseer Elisath, reaching the end of his misfortune, lies almost directly below.'

Ba'birin glanced back and forth between the deck and the eldar. 'You are suggesting cutting through.'

'Motivated by strategy, I am.'

Neleus said, 'You don't appear to be equipped for this sort of work.'

The same thought had occurred to Ba'birin as he ran his eyes over the eldar arsenal. He didn't know what they had concealed on their persons, but they weren't holding anything other than their primary weapons. The fusion guns would punch through the deck easily enough, but they would also vaporise anything beneath. The prisoner would not survive such a rescue.

Kaderial spread his hands. 'We are, by the fates, embarrassed.' His ornate, conical helmet turned Ha'garen's way. 'While you, by the same, are prepared.'

Ba'birin glanced at Ha'garen's plasma cutter. 'You are inviting us to gain initial entry to the target's prison?'

Kaderial stepped to one side. He made a sweeping, expansive gesture that took in both deck and Salamanders. 'By our wishes,' he said.

'Brother-sergeant?' Ha'garen voxed.

'I've never seen such a shameless trap,' Neleus observed, still on the company channel.

'It can afford to be,' Ba'birin said. 'We can't refuse it.'

‘We don’t know what Ha’garen will be cutting into.’

‘It is not likely to be explosive,’ Ha’garen put in, ‘or the eldar would be destroyed also. They are too close.’

Neleus wasn’t placated. ‘It isn’t likely to be the location of our target, either.’

When Ha’garen spoke again, it was with resignation. ‘There is little choice. Furthermore, I estimate that the likelihood of our being in the immediate vicinity of the target is high. So...’

He moved forwards.

‘With our thanks, Forge Master,’ Kaderial said.

Ha’garen froze. He could still take offence, Ba’birin noted. ‘I am no such thing,’ the Techmarine snapped at the eldar. ‘There is but one Master of the Forge, and that is Master Argos. You taint his honour and mine with your tongue.’

Kaderial cocked his head. ‘Perhaps. My apologies, by your leave.’ He seemed amused. ‘Still, by your path, you are exceptionally at one with the machine.’

Ha’garen ignored the comment. He lowered his cutter-wielding servo-arm until it was close to floor level. The plasma beam sliced metal, scalpel in flesh. Ha’garen traced a large rectangle, far larger than would be needed for simple access down below. He was thinking, Ba’birin realised, of squad movements, planning for speed and force. The eldar stepped back out of the way of the widening perimeter. They made no objection.

Ba’birin’s suspicions grew.

‘They are being much too accommodating,’ Neleus said, echoing his thoughts.

Ba’birin said nothing. But as Ha’garen completed the cut, he raised his flamer. He angled it towards the floor, ready to incinerate whatever might lunge from below, but it would take nothing to jerk the muzzle higher and train it on the Fire Dragons.

Ha’garen’s two manipulator servo-arms reached down and fastened their vice grips to the decking. He finished. The outline of the cut was incandescent. He gave the decking a yank. It lifted as a single piece three metres long by two wide. The eldar did not rush in. Ba’birin took a cautious step forwards to see what was below.

More of the ork ship’s sickly penumbral light. He was looking at another corridor, with more cells on either side of it. The drop was a short one. The space was not cavernous like the one where they stood. The cries of prisoners moaned up through the gap. The babble of pleas drowned out individual voices, but Ba’birin could still make out the articulations of words and phrases. The souls

down there were still sentient. Theirs, he thought, was the more cruel fate. They could hope for rescue, and despair when it did not come.

‘Where is he?’ Ba’birin asked.

‘Aft and port, by my numbers,’ said Kaderial. ‘A few lengths more.’ He made an elaborately casual hand gesture that suggested both an apology and shrug.

‘Cutting directly above, by my thinking, would have been lethal to our lost one.’

‘Quite,’ Ba’birin said. He and Neleus faced each other, sharing a silent debate. Split the squads or descend together? Attack the eldar now, forestalling the trap?

He recoiled at the idea of the pre-emptive strike. There was no honour in the act, and though he knew the warlock was setting him up, he lacked the formal proof that would satisfy his own conscience. The Salamanders had experienced treachery in the most foul form imaginable at the dawn of the Heresy, and it was repugnant to consider an action that even approached that particular sin. The eldar were a race that Ba’birin despised with every fibre of his being, but the behaviour of these warriors had all the trappings of honour, even if that couldn’t possibly be the truth of their actions.

‘Together,’ Neleus said.

‘Yes,’ Ba’birin agreed. They would not be divided. ‘Brothers,’ he called to the squads, and then dropped down to the deck below.

‘The orks, by their noise, are not long in coming,’ Kaderial said. ‘Do not tarry.’

Ba’birin bit back a retort. He could hear the growing savage rumble. The greenskins must have discovered that their bombardment had not produced the expected number of bodies.

Aft and port, Kaderial had said. Ten metres on, the Salamanders found the cell. The eldar seer was crouched inside the claustrophobic box, weak and covered in filth, but his gaze steady. He looked more than a little confused as Ha’garen ripped the door off its hinges.

‘Can you understand me?’ Ba’birin asked. When the eldar said nothing, the Space Marine jerked a thumb, and the prisoner staggered out of his cell. The Salamanders moved to surround him. Down the corridor, a group of ork guards were yelling at each other and the intruders. Two of them ran deeper into the ship. The others attacked. Berengus’s bolter cut them down. ‘Which way?’ Ba’birin asked Ha’garen.

The Techmarine looked at the cabling. ‘Back,’ he said. ‘The routes from that deck to our entry point are more direct.’

Ba’birin accepted this, along with the imminence of the struggle for custody of the seer. He still couldn’t see what strategic benefit the eldar were imagining

would be theirs by letting the Salamanders take first possession of the prisoner.

They headed back. Halfway there, Kaderial called to them. 'It is done?'

'It is,' Ba'birin answered. He braced himself. The opening was just ahead. He could see the Fire Dragons outlined in the noxious glow of the larger chamber.

'He did not suffer long, by your hands?'

Ba'birin froze. Calculations and assumptions crumbled. *What?* he thought. The eldar had been pretending concern for the prisoner's safety? They had been assuming the Salamanders were pretending too? *What, what, what?*

'Ah,' Kaderial said. 'This is, by its perversity, a realm most inimical to sight. But now I see.'

The silhouettes moved. Fusion guns and dragon's breath fired.

Everything became flame.

Madness.

Obliteration.



CHAPTER FIVE

Amidst the flash, amidst the hurtling through disintegrating space, amidst the battering thunder-burn of being caught in a fusion gun fusillade, Elisath slipped onto the skein. Time expanded as he dropped into the impossibly dense knot of his own tangled fates. The grains tumbling down the abyssal hourglass paused. When the next grain fell, his body would collide with something unyielding, unforgiving. If the impact were hard enough, the knot would be sliced as his fates came to an end. But if the blow was not fatal, the knot would grow more tangled yet. He still couldn't see far. To the disorienting energy and randomness of the orks had been added the gigantic improbability that was now unfolding. An improbability he had helped bring about.

The next grain wanted to fall. His body would soon hit. He raced up and down the paths that were visible to him, stealing a bit more time. The loss of his waystone was a cancer of fear on his soul. If death waited with the plummet of that grain, he was engaged in his final acts of awareness before he fell prey to She Who Thirsts. So he took what he could.

He meditated on irony.

His body spinning. The moment coming. Time slowed, but unforgiving, and coming for him.

He was being hunted by his kin. So he had taken the only path open to him. He had placed himself at the mercy of the Salamanders. His vision of the future was crippled, but the thread drawn by the Fire Dragons had been clear enough. They thought that killing him would preserve the secret of the shard. Stupid. Didn't they know whose ship they were on? Didn't they see where it was headed?

Didn't they know what ork it was who ruled here?

Blocking Kaderial's vision had been a simple matter. Weak as he was, Elisath was more than a match for the warlock. All he had had to do was direct

Kaderial's attention to the thread that saw the Salamanders coming to kill him. This was the particular irony that Elisath savoured now: the most improbable thread had been the one that common sense would have declared inevitable.

The grain dropped. Time and frailty hurled him from the skein, back to his body and the annihilating pain of his salvation.

A sun was born inside the kroozer. It was the offspring of simultaneous fusion and flamer barrage. It was a tiny, wailing infant of a star, an insignificant mote. Except that it did not seem like a mote in a ship's corridor. It did not seem insignificant from the inside.

Ha'garen understood the principles of the fusion gun. He knew it was similar to the Imperium's melta weapons. He knew what such a weapon did to defensive positions. To armour. To living flesh. But he did not have the luxury of reflecting on his theoretical knowledge of the fusion gun. He was too busy surviving his practical experience of its blast in the midst of a flamer attack. His world became a sear of absolute light in the microsecond before his helmet lenses shuttered, sealing his eyes in sight-preserving darkness. The heat, no less absolute, was the teeth of the light. It devoured all. It snapped its jaws around Ha'garen, and there was a moment of pain such as he had never imagined. It was a wave and a spike, an invasion from without and an attack from within. It swallowed every thought, sensation and instinct. It was his all.

And yet no, it was not. As absolute as the light, as absolute as the fire, was the core of his being, defined and shaped by the Promethean Cult. It shouted with exultation, taking the exterminating blow, accepting yet another strike on the shaping anvil, rising to the test that Vulkan sent his sons. To be of Nocturne, to be a Salamander, was to confront the ordeal. It was to endure.

And thus grow stronger.

And from the Ommissiah, the gift of the mortification of the flesh. What is weak shall be replaced. What is strong shall be transformed.

In his faiths, Ha'garen found the strength to survive a first moment in the jaws of the fire. A second moment would have killed him, but the decking melted faster. The shape of the corridor evaporated. The Salamanders dropped. The deck below disintegrated just as they hit it, and the lower abyss of the kroozer opened its jaws wide.

His lens shutters opened. Ha'garen fell into darkness. He hit something, bounced off, slammed into more metal. He bounced between ill-defined objects, his fall slowing. His eyes had adjusted before he hit the bottom. He processed his

surroundings and his injuries simultaneously.

His armour was badly scorched, his body burned not by flame but by sheer heat. The damage to the flesh was extensive but shallow. Regeneration was already under way. His armour was still viable, though one of his manipulator arms had melted to slag. Joints and seams were distorted, making movement more awkward. He took a step, learning the new character of the armour, learning what compensatory effort would be necessary to keep up his reaction speed.

Neleus, his voice strained, was calling for the count. Ha'garen answered, all the while processing the new circumstances, analysing, evaluating, extrapolating options.

The space they found themselves in was enormous. It was the largest they had yet seen on this ship. As far as Ha'garen could tell, it ran the entire length of the hull, and its ceiling was a good thirty metres high. The Salamanders' plunge had been broken by what appeared, at first glance, to be two towering heaps of scrap metal. The Space Marines had been deposited in a valley between these twisted mountains. Flames licked at the hole through which the squads had fallen. The glow was fading, the infant star dying.

The count was complete. There were losses. Five battle-brothers had died in the fusillade. The corpses of three of them had come down, their armour melted into amorphous coffins. The other two, Brothers Jer'wan and Ka'gis, had taken a direct hit and been reduced to floating molecules. There were injuries, some debilitating. Neleus had lost his left arm. The stump, extending a hand's length below his shoulder, ended in a cauterisation that was ugly, black and weeping. N'krumor was applying sterile clay from his narthecium to the wound.

Ba'birin was standing over the eldar. Elisath was on his feet, battered, bloody, but intact. Ha'garen caught himself trying to calculate the odds against the prisoner having survived the blast and the fall, unarmoured and in poor condition. Somehow, he had been surrounded by enough Salamanders, who had taken the worst of the damage, and nothing he had hit in the fall had been jagged enough to slice him open. It was impossible not to see the actions of fate in his survival.

Ba'birin turned to Ha'garen. 'Where are we?' he asked. He used the vox. The chamber was filled with a tremendous mechanical din that drowned out every other sound.

In hell, was what Ha'garen almost answered, and seen by the lights of the Cult Mechanicus, that was exactly where they were. The hold was illuminated by

haphazardly placed glow-globes, torches mounted on poles, bursts of ignited gas, and the flaming of filthy engines. What the Techmarine saw, stretching for thousands of metres in every direction, was machinic obscenity. The plasteel hill that had broken the Salamanders' fall was not simply a pile of refuse. It was a collection of parts, all of them engineered, however crudely, however partially. The entire space was a collection. It was an endless, labyrinthine conglomeration of the unfinished, the discarded and the experimental. Gigantic metal frames were heaped up against each other. Servo-arms sprouted like weeds. Some were motionless, frozen in entreaty. Many were active, and they were worse, locked in endless loops of meaningless activity. One piled objects together while another took the heap apart. Multiple arms, linked into idiotic arachnid configurations, scrabbled in competing directions. Other devices were beyond identification. They were whirling, stomping flights of fantasy, assembled for no possible reason other than that they were conceivable. Some should not have been possible, but they moved and rattled and roared, climbing up and falling over hills of less animate creations.

The scale was as varied as the objects. Something no larger than Ha'garen's fist flopped past his feet. It looked like a grenade on tracks, as if it were an abandoned prototype for a self-propelled explosive. Other creations were gigantic. One, several hundred metres towards the bow of the ship, was almost as high as the hold, and Ha'garen had initially mistaken it for another heap. It was roughly conical in shape, a stack of massive rings of decreasing diameter, all spinning in random directions. It also appeared to be jointed, and it nodded and bobbed and weaved, grotesque dancer, drunken mountain.

And everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, engines keeping the madness going. Engines that were whining irritations. Engines that were monumental maws. Engines being fed fuel by an army of gretchin and chained slaves. They swarmed over the metal nightmarescape, maggots and rats, so consumed by the endlessness of their task that the nearby gretchin were only now starting to notice the Space Marines.

Wherever Ha'garen looked, he saw the precision and purpose of technology debased. It was not the work of Chaos. It was the work of orks. It was ork logic made concrete. It was the playground of ork science, but it was also something else. A terrible epiphany dawned on Ha'garen, and he knew what he was seeing. Along with experiments, junked and ongoing, there were bits. Parts. Spares.

He finally answered Ba'birin. 'The orks store the leftovers here,' he said. 'Leftovers?'

‘The leftovers from the construction of the ship. The pieces that didn’t fit. The ones they weren’t sure what to do with, but thought might be useful some day.’

‘I’m sorry, brother,’ Ba’birin said, and there was genuine sympathy in his words.

Startled by the discovery that he could still experience revulsion, Ha’garen almost missed Ba’birin’s first real expression of friendship since the walls of Heliosa. ‘Thank you,’ he said. It was the correct response, he knew. He wondered if he should be concerned over the fact that his reaction to Ba’birin’s gesture was not gratitude, relief, or even satisfaction, but simply interest.

What are you?

Neleus asked, ‘Can we reach our boarding point from here?’

The gretchin were scurrying to safety and shrieking warnings.

Ha’garen called up his memory map of the power grid. The readings for this region were erratic, difficult to interpret. But there were some stable junctions. They might well be near entry points to the hold. ‘Perhaps,’ he said. He identified the power flare that was linked to the most promising route out of the hold. Probability, or perhaps just hope, suggested heading sternwards and portside.

Ba’birin nodded. The Salamanders formed up, with Elisath in the centre of the armoured tortoise configuration, and began to march. The elapsed time since the eldar had opened fire was less than a minute. The squads had regrouped after the fall at speed. The Salamanders did not fetishise speed on the battlefield in the manner of the White Scars. They preferred the steady, unstoppable advance. That did not mean their reaction time was any less rapid.

But there was a reason for their emphasis on battlefield strength. The foe could easily be faster. The key to victory was not to strike first, necessarily. It was to withstand all that the foe could muster, and then give the decisive blow of the conflict.

Movement above. Movement on the periphery.

‘Be strengthened by the anvil, brothers,’ Ba’birin called, ‘then shatter our enemies against it.’

Eldar and orks rushed to be shattered.

The Fire Dragons had come through the gap and were descending the slope of the metal heap. They were moving fast, but they didn’t have a clear shot. The topography of the hold kept changing as the piles shifted, whirled, collapsed over each other and rose again. The Salamanders stayed low, sticking to paths of bare decking, and the movement was as unpredictable and changeable as the

environment.

‘How much fuel do those melta weapons have?’ Ba’birin wondered.

‘Something less than infinite,’ Neleus quipped. The strain had vanished from his voice. He was at war, and he had banished distracting pain.

‘They are short-range weapons,’ Ha’garen said. ‘They will need opportunity. There is also the risk. We are very close to the outer hull. Another attack like earlier and everything in this chamber will be cast to the void.’

Neleus said, ‘I don’t think they’re suicidal.’

‘That depends on how desperate they are to complete the mission,’ Ba’birin pointed out. He turned his head to look back at Elisath. ‘Why do they want you dead?’ he asked.

The eldar didn’t answer. His face was closed, unreadable. He looked desperately fragile to Ha’garen, a bundle of crystal sticks. But he was keeping up with the pace of the much larger Space Marines, and his footsteps were sure.

Ha’garen checked over his shoulder. The Fire Dragons were still coming on, but now they had to pay attention to their own survival. A hideous tide of orks was spilling through the gap. The greenskins were pouring in through every access hatch and gate. Numbers growing exponentially, they formed a cordon around the edges of the hold and closed in. During the time it took the Salamanders to move a hundred metres towards their goal, so many orks had arrived that their chants and roars were audible above the unceasing clamour of the engines.

This was no longer a force sent to repel invaders. This was an army. And it had come to fight in an open space. No more bottlenecking in constricted passageways. The Salamanders might as well have been on a planetside battlefield. Ha’garen did not calculate the odds of fewer than twenty Adeptus Astartes against thousands of orks. He knew what they were. The enemy’s reinforcements were, in practical terms, unlimited.

None of this mattered. The mission mattered. Duty mattered. The Salamanders would smash their way through ork lines through force of will.

The tide came on. It arrived as a storm surge of gretchin. Ha’garen looked at the squalling, scrabbling, creatures and saw hook-nosed vermin. They came bounding over the metal waves, wielding makeshift blades and axes, and firing guns that looked even more primitive than the gretchin themselves. Ha’garen saw more than a few pistols explode, killing their owners. The nearby creatures howled with delighted laughter. Larger orks came on immediately behind the gretchin, shouting curses and jabbing at the reluctant with electric prods.

The diminutive xenos weren't threats, but they were an obstacle. They swarmed around the Salamanders' feet, many of them as anxious to flee as they had been to arrive, but just as great a nuisance. They were a morass. Ha'garen swept them away with his servo-arms. His blows pulped. He moved ahead of Neleus and Ba'birin and cleared the way. The crack of bones and squish of internal organs reverberated down the length of the arms. It was like threshing green wheat.

The Salamanders formation opened fire, bolter rounds streaking not through uncountable gretchin, but straight to the brain pans of their minders. Heads burst like exploded fruit. Bodies toppled. The gretchin panicked. They scrabbled like cornered rats. There was nowhere for them to run as the principle thrust of orks charged. The greenskins laid down a horizontal curtain of heavy-calibre slugs before them. Gretchin exploded into mist. The Salamanders tightened their formation, absorbing the bullets, taking the hits and moving forwards, holding fire and above all protecting the eldar in their midst.

'I am half-sick of irony,' Neleus muttered.

The straightest line to the target exit took the Salamanders straight into the thick of the ork host. Towering shapes waved in the corner of Ha'garen's eye. Inspiration beckoned. He tapped Ba'birin's shoulder and pointed. The sergeant changed direction without question. The Salamanders pounded over low-lying heaps of scrap towards a cluster of towering axles and pistons. The plasteel trunks vibrated and shook as they rotated. Their foliage was gears and blades several metres in diameter. They spun high above, turning nothing but air.

Only seconds now to the full impact. Ha'garen felt adrenaline levels surge to levels of ecstatic rage. The other clashes had been mere prologue, and when Neleus shouted '*Into the fires of battle!*' the cry was more than words. It was the spirit of the Chapter forged in sound.

The answer came: '*Unto the Anvil of War!*' And this, this was the will of the warriors. It was the alchemical fusion of fury and righteousness and juggernaut determination. The thunder of the roar was a physical force, the blow of Vulkan's hammer made manifest. It struck the enemy hard, and the front lines of greenskins actually stumbled a moment before the oncoming wrath.

Salamanders and orks crashed together in the shadow of the demented forest. It was the collision of solid, burning fist and rampaging mob. The Salamanders unleashed a stream of flamer and bolter-fire. Orks blew apart and burned. The smell of cooking meat mixed with the hard tang of spraying blood and the miasma of ork stench. The rush of orks was slowed less by intimidation than by

the need to clamber over and through the dead. Ha'garen saw more than a few greenskins trip and be trampled by their charging kin. The Salamanders descended upon the next lines with the snarl of chainblades. Ha'garen swung his chainaxe and took an ork's head off above the nose. He rammed forwards, a machine beast with five arms, all of them pounding his enemies to broken sacks of bone and leaking blood. He battered away blows aimed at his head, shrugged off the strikes that hit home. Momentum and fury pushed him ten metres into the lines of the orks.

It was enough. He was in the midst of the rotating cylinders, just forward of the rest of his battle-brothers. He turned his plasma cutter on an axle. It was thirty metres tall and festooned with cog wheels starting halfway up its length. The wheels varied in diameter from two to four metres, and brushed very close to the shafts on either side. They were so ragged, they could never have been intended to mesh with other gears. They looked predatory. They were metal whose one function was to tear and rip. Ha'garen would see them fed. He cut away a chunk of the shaft, and peered inside the hole as it rotated past. There was no power cable. The axle seemed to have its own power source built in. It was as if its engineer had seen the device as an end in itself, not part of a functioning whole, and, knowing that the object was supposed to rotate, had ensured that it would, no matter what.

Ha'garen shrugged off the ork logic and sliced through the shaft at an angle, controlling where the towering axle would fall. The rest of the Salamanders reformed around him, dropping the orks that entered the whirling, grinding, humming forest. They created a perimeter ten metres wide, containing the Techmarine and his sabotaged poles. Elisath crouched in the centre. The line was thin, and pressed hard. The Space Marines were barely more than a dozen strong. They held. Green rage crashed against them, hacking with the strength that came of an existence devoted to nothing else except conflict. The Salamanders held. They held because they had to. Ha'garen moved from iron trunk to iron trunk, cutting until each pole was on the razor's edge of falling, but holding back until he had a dozen ready for the touch of his will. They formed a rough circle.

As he finished the last one, his brothers pulled in, concentrating their force, constricting the circle within Ha'garen's trap. Every move the Salamanders had made, from the moment Ha'garen had pointed at this spot, had been accomplished without a word being uttered. Every warrior had seen the location's potential and had known what to do. The silent efficiency was a hymn

to the Omnissiah, Ha'garen thought. Organics functioning together with machinic rigour had an aesthetic and moral strength. It was, he realised, art of a kind, a kind to which he could still respond. Mechanics, war and art were fused together into a manifestation of the divine.

He felt something in his chest. For a moment, he did not know what it was. Then he recognised it: it was elation.

He finished his preparatory cuts, then moved to the centre of the Salamanders formation. He raised his cutter arm high above his head. He angled the muzzle down. The squads ceased fire. They let the orks approach. The green horde rushed in, sensing only opportunity. The guttural shouts of the aliens crested against the clanking, grinding clash of the nonsense engines.

At the back of his mind, Ha'garen noted that the orks were using very few projectile weapons of any sort, and were deploying none of their heavy guns. More data to be analysed later. Now, in this moment, he was experiencing the very flesh-based sensation of contempt. He looked at the orks in their overwhelming numbers as they surged through their macabre, mechanical playground, and saw a slovenly, unforgivable disregard for order and the truth of the machine.

He fired up the plasma cutter. He spun it in a circle. He finished the cuts. Time for a hard lesson.



CHAPTER SIX

The shafts split a metre up from where they plunged into the scrap-metal loam that covered the deck. They fell, still spinning. Cog wheels and blades flailed. In their deaths, the shafts were no longer metal trees. They were grotesque, monopod giants panicking in their moments of doom. Vibrating, spasming with centripetal seizures, they crashed down around the Salamanders. They became the spread and grasping fingers of Ha'garen. He had forged a power with a reach of dozens of metres. The shafts crushed the orks beneath them. The jagged wheels dug deep into the flesh of the howling army. The spinning did not stop. The wheels found traction. They chewed the orks into mulch, hurling bloody chunks and splintered bone high and far. They bounced and drove over and through greenskin bodies. The violent rotation carried the shafts away, pulping and shredding. They left a swath of smeared green punctuated by bits of torn armour and splintered, jagged bone. The orks fled from the jouncing meat-shredders. The roars were just as loud as before, only now they were hitting the higher registers of surprised fear. The army before the Salamanders thinned, culled and frightened. The rear lines pushed forwards, urged on by something more formidable than the insane axles, but they ran into their fleeing comrades. Confusion reigned.

The way forward was close to clear. Only a few hundred metres to the cargo bay exit. The Salamanders stormed into the disorder, slashing and crushing. The same tight defensive formation as before, striking like a spiked, mailed fist. Power and chainblades scythed greenskins as they tried to recover their momentum.

Ha'garen estimated he had gained the squads fifteen or twenty seconds before the orks shrugged off the blow. Perhaps a bit longer, because several shafts were still careening about on unpredictable trajectories.

Ba'birin gave him an approving nod as they fought their way forwards. 'Well played, brother,' he said.

'Thank you,' Ha'garen answered, noncommittal. What war had riven, it had now reknit. He noted this with mild interest, and he noted his mild interest with alarm. Was there no possibility for brotherhood left in his evolving configuration?

What are you?

A question for later, because now something arced through the air at them. It was small and metallic. It gleamed in the fitful light of the cargo hold.

'Grenade!' Neleus yelled. It came down in the centre of the squads, expertly thrown. Ba'birin grabbed Elisath and threw himself to one side. Ha'garen leaped with them. The melta bomb went off, vaporising a pile of stacked parts, a whining engine and the lower half of Brother Battarus's body. Battarus crashed down, a felled monument. The damage was catastrophic. His system could not hope to repair itself. He was still conscious, still clutching his heavy bolter. A sound emerged from his helmet grille. It was agony transmuted into terminal rage.

The hull did not burst open. The atmosphere did not rush into the void. Tiny mercies.

The Fire Dragons leaped from cover to cover, covering ground with the grace and speed of las-fire. Ha'garen's rolling destruction had given the eldar the chance to break from the ork forces that had been pinning them down. The Salamanders returned fire with bolters, using the weapons' greater range to break the eldar rhythm and block another grenade toss.

Battarus's rasping roar turned into a word. '*Go!*'

N'krumor had been leaning over him, carnifex aimed at Battarus's temple to grant him the Emperor's Peace. 'Brother,' he began, 'you will be sacrificing—'

'*Go!*' There was nothing human in the cry, barely anything alive. It was the sound of pure, furious will animating a body just a bit longer, reaching out to punish the enemy one last time. Battarus raised the heavy bolter with arms that shouldn't have been able to move at all.

'Vulkan guide you, brother,' Ba'birin said. The Salamanders left him, the mission overriding mercy and the need to recover progenoid glands. As they moved off, Ha'garen heard the heavy bolter open up, its murderous *chug-chug-chug* denying the Fire Dragons' advance. Shells blasted through a weak cover point. The eldar warrior behind them exploded into pink mist.

The Salamanders pushed forwards another dozen metres. The pathway

dropped and twisted, turning into a trench through higher stacks of metal. More of these moved, crawling on their clumsy tracks as they carried out non-existent duties. They changed the route of the trench every few seconds. The orks had recovered and were hungry for retaliation. Only the narrow confines of the path now prevented them from crushing the Space Marines with the sheer mass of their numbers.

The heavy bolter fell silent. Another melta bomb landed close, heat from the heart of a sun banishing a cluster of orks and scrap from sight and memory.

Ha'garen faced the direction the grenade had come from. He couldn't see the eldar. There were too many orks pouring over the lip of the trench. His chainaxe chopped down through the skull of the beast in front of him, splitting the greenskin in two. He raised his cutter arm high and fired the plasma beam. It was a blind shot, a raking sweep. He knew he was killing orks. There was no room to miss. As for the eldar, the best he could hope was that he was making them keep their heads down.

Shrieking whistles. And then an eruption. Fireballs and smoke, an upheaval of metal and a rain of bodies and shrapnel. Enthusiastic carnage concentrated in the region where Ha'garen had last seen the eldar. It was a volley of rockets and grenades, blanketing the area, completely indiscriminate. There was no thought to ork casualties as long as the eldar got a taste.

None of the ordnance came anywhere close to the Salamanders' position.

'What just happened?' Neleus demanded. He plunged his chainsword point-first into an ork's forehead. The greenskin's jaw went slack in death and surprise. 'And I do not want to hear that we just received covering fire from orks.'

'Evidence suggests precisely that,' Ha'garen answered. And still the orks pressed in. There was no quarter in their attacks, no lack of the furious desire to butcher the Space Marines.

Neleus grunted. 'I was wrong earlier,' he said. 'I am *utterly* sick of irony.'

'Why aren't they shooting?' N'krumor wondered.

The detail returned to the front of Ha'garen's mind. It was insistent this time, demanding to be explained. The answer came a few moments later. A massive ork, bristling in spiked armour, chainaxe in one hand, power claw in the other, rounded the next corner of the path and slammed into Ba'birin. The greenskin was fully as tall as the Salamander, and the force of the blow knocked Ba'birin back a step. The ork raised both claw and axe to pound the Space Marine into the metal litter of the decking. Ba'birin raised his flamer. Ignited promethium engulfed the ork's head and took out three others coming over the top of the

trench. But right behind the big ork came a much smaller one. It didn't even try to hit Ba'birin. Instead, it ducked around the Salamander's legs and reached for Elisath. Ha'garen struck it down with his remaining grip arm. The ork collapsed, spine cracked. Ha'garen closed the vice over the greenskin's head and squeezed it to jelly. He took in that the ork had nothing in its hands. It had a blade at its waist. *Sheathed*. Ha'garen had never seen a sheathed ork weapon.

Realisation dawned. 'They want the prisoner back,' Ha'garen said. 'They want him alive.'

Silence on the vox. For a few seconds, the only focus was on killing as implications sank in. Fact: the orks wanted Elisath badly enough that they refrained from using maximum deadly force. Inference: they were being led by a commander canny enough to think beyond bloody-minded violence. Inference: a commander *powerful* enough to impose *restraint* on orks. The schemes uncovered by the White Scars and the Raven Guard were proof enough of tactical ability and influence. But the degree of tactical attention on the current battlefield spoke of a moment-to-moment awareness of the conflict's currents.

That enormous shadow in the arena.

The Overfiend was close.

'If he wants his prize badly enough,' Ba'birin said, 'he had better show himself.' He gutted two more orks, and walked over their twitching bodies.

'Eager?' Neleus asked, sounding like he was.

'The final contours of this mission would be highly satisfactory,' Ha'garen said.

An amused snort from Ba'birin. 'Contain your passion, brother,' he said.

'I will try,' Ha'garen answered, making Neleus laugh. Laughing and snarling, beating and burning orks.

They moved closer to the exit, but slowly, too slowly. The orks came on, and on and on. There was no end to them. If the Salamanders could reach the narrower space of the corridors, they stood a chance of fighting through to the boarding torpedoes. But as they rounded another bend in the junkyard madness of the hold, the path rose, and the final stretch was in the open.

The cry of the orks took on a new note of triumph as they thundered in for the finish.

In their midst was something huge and clanking.

The kroozer was closing in on the decision point. Once it reached orbit, Mulcebar would have his hand forced. He could not permit the ork force on the

ship to land. Not while there was something on that planet that would power them up. He would not betray the efforts of the Raven Guard, and he would not doom the people. The moment loomed when he would have to deem the mission a failure, and open fire on the kroozer. His grim prayer was that, if the moment came, it would be because his men were already dead. He understood the higher imperative. He knew what had to be done. That did not mean he relished having his warriors' blood on his hands.

The *Verdict of the Anvil* had shadowed the kroozer since the launch of the boarding party. Mulcebar had held the strike cruiser at a distance, presenting a less inviting target, and giving the repair crews a chance to heal what they could of the *Verdict's* injuries. The kroozer's fire had diminished since the boarding torpedoes had hit, as if the tactical intelligence aboard the ship were being distracted by other, more pressing problems. Now Mulcebar ordered the distance closed. Vox contact with the boarding party was becoming more and more sporadic. He knew the prisoner had been found, and he knew that the fighting was so fierce there was the very real chance that the boarding torpedoes were impossibly distant.

'I want firing resolutions for the forward batteries,' he announced. 'And for the nova cannon.'

There was no true pause before his orders were carried out, but there was a beat of silence as the *Verdict of the Anvil* prepared to annihilate some of its own.

'Contacts,' the augury servitor intoned. 'Ork ships.' It began a list of designations, and the list just kept going. Mulcebar called the readings up on a taticarium screen. Ships were translating into the system. They were coming in force. This was not a squadron. It was a fleet.

Mulcebar saw his options become very few and very bad.

He also saw his choice become very easy, if he could receive the answer he needed to a simple question. He opened the vox-channel to the boarding party. 'Brother Berengus,' he said, 'link me to your sergeants.'

Static. Explosions of white noise mixed with clanging and grunts. Then a clipped, 'Brother-captain,' as if squeezed in between death blows. Ba'birin's voice.

'Can you yet prevail?' It was an honest question. Mulcebar required an honest answer.

Ba'birin's response was almost completely lost in the welter of growls and clashes of metal that erupted from the speaker. Only one word came through: 'Anvil.' Its two syllables were spoken with faith and determination.

So it wasn't just an easy choice. It was really no choice at all.

'Helmsmaster,' Mulcebar told Phanes, 'we need a new bearing. We will face the greenskin fleet.'

Again that beat of silence, only this time because of eagerness.

The *Verdict* turned. The wounded predator raced to throw itself into the teeth of the swarm. Mulcebar watched the screens as the catalogue of attackers grew.

++*Designation: Onslaught.*++

++*Designation: Ravager.*++

++*Designation: Savage.*++

++*Designation: Brute.*++

Over and over and over, a multiplying taxonomy of threats. And something else, multiplying and repeating like the beat of a savage drum:

++*Designation: Unknown.*++

++*Designation: Unknown.*++

++*Designation: Unknown.*++

To the massive punch of the attack ships was added a host of the eccentric and the grotesque. Many ships appeared to be formerly Imperial, killed, salvaged and reconfigured into xenos obscenity. Others, whatever they had once been, were now hulks, garbage given propulsion and made stupidly dangerous. There were transports, out of which came insect clouds of fighters and bombers. There were ships that should never have made it through the warp, but had reached the field of battle on the strength, it seemed to Mulcebar, of sheer ignorance. Some had not arrived intact, and were already burning, breaking up into high-velocity debris that crippled and killed nearby craft.

But enough had come through. Too many. Mulcebar was looking at the green horde embodied in void-ships.

There was really only one sensible response to the horde: burning it.

'Nova cannon ready,' Phanes said.

The *Verdict of the Anvil* was still a fair distance from the ork fleet. Too far for either side to deploy guns and torpedoes to any effect. The nova cannon had plenty of range. It was the drake's breath of the Salamanders, and it had been held back for too long. 'Give me a target,' said Mulcebar. 'Anything of attack-ship size or greater. In the centre of their formation.' The cannon wasn't an accurate weapon. It didn't need to be. It was a gun that embodied the idea that 'close' was good enough. Mulcebar simply wanted a point chosen for the moment of shell implosion.

'There's a very large mass,' the gunnery officer said. 'Bigger than a grand

cruiser.'

'Shoot that,' Mulcebar said. 'Fire.'

The nova cannon was a marvel of war. It was a technological miracle worthy of the most hushed Mechanicus prayers. But in its fundamental conception, at the core of its being, it was simplicity itself. It was just a gun. A gun of godlike proportions, but a gun. Its barrel ran much of the length of the strike cruiser. Its projectile was fifty metres in diameter, and was fired at speeds commensurate with the weapon's scale. When Mulcebar gave the order, enough stored energy to power the entire ship was unleashed. The weapon's trigger automatically kicked the *Verdict of the Anvil*'s engines into a massive thrust forwards against the cannon's recoil. Magnetic fields that bordered on the sorcerous impelled the projectile to near light-speed. Space bent as the shell blasted from the prow of the *Verdict*. It slashed across the Lepidus system to the storm of ork ships on the wings of wrath.

Before it reached the implosion point, the shell passed through two ork craft. The encounters had almost no effect on the projectile. Massive as it was, its size was negligible by comparison to the hulk and the Ravager that crossed its path. But its kinetic energy was near infinite. The ships slowed the shell by a microscopic degree, to their doom. The energy transferred to their hulls blew them apart, every rivet and beam flying off as if in terror from the point of impact. For a fraction of a second, the ships retained their shapes, swelling, still moving forwards. Then they disintegrated, the blasts of their stricken fusion engines racing to swallow the metal debris.

Then the light of their spreading destruction was eclipsed by the bright dawn of the shell's death.

The implosion stopped the shell's flight. Kinetic energy was released as light and heat. The light and heat of hell. For a few terrible seconds, the system had a second star. It howled its birth and death in the dense centre of the ork fleet. The nearest ship was a massive transport. It had once been the Universal-class mass conveyor *Benedictionis Aeternae*. Twelve kilometres long, it had, before its first doom, been host to a voidfaring community that had developed a thousand years of unique culture. Its people had created blown-glass icons that were never seen outside the ship's hull, and that would have moved the most unforgiving Ministorum cleric to tears. Now it carried an invasion force of half a million orks. The nova cannon strike blew a hole a third of the ship's size in its stern. The demolished plasma engines added their screams to the new star's. The *Benedictionis* bucked, its prow dropping as if in penance for its betrayal before it

boiled out of existence. It took the last of its glass icons with it. The five-hundred metre winged statue of Cardinal Marat survived long enough to fly straight into the loading bay of a bomber transport, venting the entire ship's oxygen supply.

The damage radiated out of the implosion zone in chained explosions. When night fell again, half a dozen ships had been crippled or destroyed. The *Verdict of the Anvil* had struck a legendary blow.

And an inadequate one. The orks broke formation, scattering from the devastation. The fleet lost cohesion. But still the horde was present. Still, it came on.

In their crude language, the orks called the thing a Deff Dread. It was an insult, by its very existence. Ha'garen felt his gorge rise in hatred. His modified cortex suppressed the emotion, perceiving it as a threat to rational action. It transmuted the energy into strength and speed of motion.

The ork creation was a blasphemous parody of a Dreadnought. Its body was a huge metal box, somewhat taller than it was wide. Spikes jutted from its base like tusks from a jaw. Mounted on each side was a massive gun barrel. The thing rocked side to side as it advanced, with a speed that belied its apparent clumsiness, on pile-driver legs. Steam and oil shrieked from the joints. It waved massive pincers twice the size of Ha'garen's servo-arms. The right limb had the lower claw of its pincer replaced with a circular saw. The modification made little practical sense, but displayed a raw genius for violence. The pincer would automatically start shredding anything it grabbed.

The Deff Dread thundered into the Salamanders' flank. R'alum met it with bolter-fire. The rounds punched and dented the walker's armour, but the monster didn't notice. The painted, snarling face of the Dread appeared to laugh as its arms grabbed R'alum. The saw screeched as its teeth ground against ceramite. Splinters of metal and armour sprayed. The saw was digging into R'alum's shoulder, working to sever his arm, when the Dread threw him into the air. Speakers amplified and distorted monstrous laughter as the mechanised ork opened fire. It tracked the arc of R'alum's flight, slamming a rapid-fire stream of massive rounds into the Salamander's body. He was a mass of butchered meat when he hit the deck.

Ha'garen cut his way through the ork before him and closed with the Deff Dread. It still had its back to him, but swivelled as he drew near. Its reach was much greater than his, but he dropped as the enormous arms swept in to grab

him. He angled his flamer nozzle up and bathed the front of the Dread with fire. He didn't hurt the ork imprisoned in the war machine, but he did confuse the beast. It staggered blindly, flailing its arms, firing off random shots. Staying low, keeping the flames going, Ha'garen raised his cutter arm to a narrow horizontal slit, level with where he imagined the pilot's head would be. He fired the plasma beam through the slit. The scream was very short. The Deff Dread stumbled forwards on nervous system reflex, the momentum of its mechanism sending it on a pointless march, its arms swinging like syncopated pendulums. It waded into the crush of orks, leaving a wake of crushed bodies.

Orks wailed and fled the erratic path of the walking coffin. Then a moment came of precious hope and potential. Ha'garen saw the way forward across the last few dozen metres of the hold's metal dementia to the exit and the corridors beyond. It was not clear, but the ork density had thinned. A short, concerted punch was all the Salamanders needed now. Not in a straight line, but lunging from enemy weakness to enemy weakness. Instinct, forged by decades, recalled by the molten light in the forge of war, had him call to Ba'birin.

'I see it,' Ba'birin answered before Ha'garen could speak. The same instinct there.

But no, Ha'garen realised as the second of possibility stretched long in his consciousness. The instincts weren't the same. Not his, at any rate. What had been unthought before was now the product of analysis. The battlefield resolved itself before his eyes as an exercise in the application of force. To act was not to follow gut impulse. The nature of the distance between himself and his battle-brothers achieved a still-greater clarity. Their actions would mesh, but emerge from different origins. He would forever be among brothers, but never again be part of them.

Ha'garen worked through the thought process and reached its conclusion in the time it took Ba'birin to speak his three syllables. That was also how long the moment lasted. It ended with a storm: a hail of melta bombs and a wind of fire.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The eldar strike force had been hammered badly. It was down to half its strength. Its extermination was inevitable. Its mission was the most important fact of its members' existence. So the Fire Dragons struck with the furious desperation of a terminally wounded animal. Weapons fuel was no longer a concern. There was only the imperative to stop the Salamanders here, in this nightmare space, before they disappeared into the warren of corridors. Beyond that, there was nothing for which to hope.

Later, Ha'garen would have the spare seconds needed to look back at this moment and understand the frantic need of eldar. But now, all he knew was heat and a terrible alchemy that turned metal to liquid and gas, and battle-brother to twisted hulk or nothing, nothing at all. The Fire Dragons kept up a constant stream of fire from their fusion guns as they advanced. A swath of orks vanished, and after them more Salamanders, reduced to vibrating molecules.

(Remember their names, add them to the roster of the lost and faithful: Verus and Hateris, Tychaeus, Sy'pax and Ob'iang. The cordon between the Fire Dragons and Elisath. The Space Marines who sacrificed themselves for an eldar. Warriors of purest faith and unshakeable duty.)

There was no formation defence against weapons designed to melt tanks and bunkers. For several seconds, the Salamanders were under simultaneous attack by enemies of such radically opposite methods of warmaking that to counter one was to be vulnerable to the other. Then the eldar strike culled the orks engaged with the Space Marines, and there were possible actions.

The Salamanders spread out, reducing the effectiveness of the fusion guns. There were no more melta bombs coming. Ha'garen deduced that there would be no further such weapons on this field. If the eldar still had some, they would have used them and finished the squads completely. They had not. Instead, they

closed rapidly, still firing, their leader scouring the terrain before him and all who stood on it with his powerful xenos flamer.

Ha'garen grabbed Elisath with two servo-arms and hurled him out of the range of the Aspect Warrior rushing to greet him. His flesh-arms swung the chainaxe. The eldar jerked left, trying to dance around him and reach the seer. Ha'garen's ruined servo-arm, now nothing but an articulated club, swept in, knocking the Fire Dragon off balance. Ha'garen brought the chainaxe back. His blow exploded the eldar's helmet and face.

As he finished the swing, a blur passed within his reach and lunged upwards at his neck with a sword. Ha'garen took a stumbled step back, and the Witchblade sliced within centimetres of the seam between his gorget and helmet. Ha'garen grounded himself on his heel and countered with his axe, reversing his swing and bringing the weapon up. Its teeth snarled, ripping the air as they sought to tear flesh.

Kaderial sidestepped. The eldar's timing was beyond exquisite: it was impossible. As Ha'garen's chainaxe went high, catching nothing, he realised that the warlock had dodged the instant *before* Ha'garen had begun his counter. And now the Witchblade plunged at his chest. He pivoted to deflect. He was as slow as Kaderial had been fast. He turned away the full force of the blow, but the blade sliced through his armour and he felt something cold and merciless, an omen of mortality, slide between his ribs. He brought his flamer to bear, and Kaderial was already behind him. He spun again, swinging the chainaxe before him, trying to use his greater reach to push the warlock back and regain the initiative.

Kaderial was ahead of him again. The eldar crouched low, beneath the arc of the axe blade. The sword rose in a gutting strike. Ha'garen's armour took the hit, but the sorcerous blade carved a deep gouge up his placket. He jumped back, using the damaged servo-arm to block a second strike. The sword sliced the arm off below the first joint, leaving Ha'garen a flapping stump on the servo-harness. The limb had already been ruined, and it was not part of his body, but his nervous system felt the loss as keenly as any flesh amputation.

Kaderial jumped forwards, pressing his advantage. Ha'garen changed tactics, defending with offence, trying to crowd the warlock, limit his movements. Their duel was a brutal dance of move and countermove, but one where Ha'garen was perpetually out of step and off the beat. It was like a game of regicide where one player was obliged to reveal all his moves in advance to the other. Every one of Ha'garen's blocks simply exposed a different flank to Kaderial. Every counter

was nothing but an invitation for a specific strike. Ha'garen landed no blows. Kaderial was insubstantial as a shadow, as fluid as quicksilver. He struck the Techmarine at his leisure. There was a condescending artistry to his movements, as if it were somehow beneath him to be saddled with so clumsy and brutish a foe. When he decapitated the orks who tried to rush in and capitalise on the distraction of the duellists, the kills were elegant grace notes in a composition of perfect balance and harmony. Ha'garen's only victory was in not dying. He suffered a thousand cuts, and he turned them into a bloody accumulation of minor wounds, just managing, with hit after hit, to deflect and absorb and redirect the blade. His transhuman nature kept him alive. His wounds clotted almost as quickly as they were inflicted.

Giving Kaderial a long fight was no victory. So as he fought and blocked and bled, Ha'garen analysed. The eldar was faster and more agile. His anticipation of Ha'garen's moves was far beyond skill and the ability to read an opponent. The warlock responded before Ha'garen even knew what he was going to do. Kaderial had some form of precognitive power.

Query: how do you vanquish a foe who can see the future?

Answer: put him in circumstances where that makes no difference.

Ha'garen saw what he had to do. So did Kaderial. The warlock stepped away from Ha'garen and thrust out his left hand, palm out. He hurled something at Ha'garen, something with no form but fierce substance. It hit Ha'garen, an invisible tidal wave. It was a blast of hatred and loathing. It pummelled Ha'garen. It crushed and drowned. It engulfed him with the knowledge that his species was the most obscene aberration the galaxy had ever produced. It implied by assault that extinction was too kind a fate for a species so perverse, so hideous, so vile. So beyond any hope for redemption.

The weight of the loathing was immense. The power of the attack came in the depersonalisation of the hatred. When it struck, it was no longer the expression of one being. It was the wrathful judgement of the cosmos itself. It sank through the interstices of his soul, a deluge onto sand, seeking the means to pry him apart. Ha'garen did not know fear. Since his induction into the cult of the Omnissiah, he knew very little emotion of any kind. But he still bore traces of the human in his being, and so he did know doubt. Not in the Emperor. Not in the Machine-God. Not in his Chapter.

What are you?

In himself.

The seeds of doubt responded to the scalding hate. They rose to meet it like

poisonous desert blooms. Their tendrils tangled in his will, strangled his sense of self. They suffocated him, concealing everything, becoming everything. They had their own will, and that was to bring him to his knees in despair. Their blackness reached beyond the soul as his physiology reacted to the attack. His vision greyed. There was weakness in his limbs. The very air turned to grasping mud that would not let him move. Awareness of the orks charging at his back, of Kaderial raising his blade, of anything other than the dark flowering of doubt shrank to a distant point.

He fought back. He attacked the doubt with the weapons that remained to him: the certainties of Emperor, Omnissiah and Chapter. Those were the unshakeable bedrock of his being, the core without which he would not exist, and he *did* exist. And as long as he existed, there was duty. It too, was beyond doubt. Its demands did not care for doubt. Duty was action, and if he did not act, he would fail in his duty.

And betray Emperor, Omnissiah, Chapter.

Rage, pure and holy, at the mere concept of betrayal burned through the foliage of doubt. The poison still coursed through his system, but it had been there before Kaderial's attack. It would still be there after the eldar lay dead at his feet.

His vision cleared. The darkness evaporated. Kaderial was still raising his blade. He still had his palm out. Ha'garen's internal war had lasted less than the blink of an eye. Too long. In his anger, he surged forwards, chainaxe roaring for blood. His three remaining servo-arms lunged at Kaderial to grasp and cut and burn. Ha'garen struck to overwhelm. This was the attack the eldar had tried to prevent. This was the attack against which no degree of foreknowledge could help. This was *doom*.

Ha'garen stormed into Kaderial, bringing the eldar within the full, terrible storm of his grasp. He surrounded Kaderial with the war-form of his rage. Plasma beam, promethium and chainaxe descended on the eldar from all sides. There was no escape. Kaderial did not dodge. He did not attempt that futility. Instead, he attempted another: to kill a Space Marine in the full transport of righteous fury. With nowhere to retreat, he met Ha'garen's charge. The clash was unbalanced, a reed against a stampeding sauroch. But the weed had a thorn, and Kaderial plunged the Witchblade deep into Ha'garen's torso. The Techmarine did not deflect the blow. The fury of his assault threw Kaderial's aim off, and the sword did not strike true. It stabbed Ha'garen in the side. The wound was deep, the blood flow copious. He would heal. The blood would clot in a few moments.

But now the sword was his. He clamped an arm against his side and trapped the blade in his body. Kaderial tried to tug it out. He didn't have the strength. Ha'garen closed the burning, searing, crushing trap around the eldar.

'By your ignorance,' Kaderial began, 'you will destroy all...' The words failed him by the end, and Ha'garen barely caught them. Then there was crushing and paralysis, cutting and flame. He reduced the eldar to pulp and charcoal.

When there was nothing left of Kaderial, Ha'garen looked for Elisath. The seer wasn't far. He was still within the thinned ranks of the Salamanders. He was crouched behind a large metal box from which sprang a profusion of flexible stalks. Dangling from the stalks were chunks of iron cut into a senseless variety of shapes. Ha'garen had no idea what use the object could possibly have. Then again, he could say the same about Elisath.

But he knew his duty.

Ha'garen ran to the seer. Just behind the box, a melta bomb had gouged a crater in the scrap metal, almost down to the bare deck. Its walls were steep, and on the far side rose what looked like a dorsal fin five metres high. The location was almost defensible. Ha'garen tossed the seer into the makeshift trench.

As his battle-brothers took down the Fire Dragons and converged on his position, Ha'garen turned to face the next threat to the seer. It was the eldar commander. He was advancing behind the wall of flame that his weapon was projecting. His approach, stolid and relentless, was, Ha'garen thought, more Salamander than eldar in style. It was also, for this warrior, suicidal. Down to his last few troops, lightly armoured, outnumbered by a factor of many thousands, the eldar had little chance of surviving beyond the next few seconds. But he might well drive his flame through enough foes to reach and kill his target. There was a commitment there that Ha'garen understood, even as he prepared to thwart it.

Ha'garen heard thunder. He looked past the eldar leader. The oncoming orks were turned into silhouettes by the glare of the flames. They were big, much bigger than the ones the Salamanders had been fighting. Leading them was a monster. Ha'garen recognised the gigantic shape from the arena. It was larger than any ork he had ever seen. The entire hold seemed to shake with the doom-beat of its footfalls.

'Brothers,' Ha'garen said. 'He is here.'

The Overfiend loomed over the Fire Dragons commander. The eldar must have known what had come for him. The energy of the ork's presence alone was overwhelming. But the eldar did not look back, did not deviate, marched straight

on towards Ha'garen's position and the seer.

Such was *his* duty. Such was his end.

The Overfiend fell upon the Fire Dragon. He reached a massive, mailed hand down.

Before the Overfiend could grasp the eldar, something happened. And the flames shone hellish light on a terrible miracle.

The kill kroozer entered low orbit of Lepidus Prime. Dropping through the ionosphere to a point less than a hundred kilometres in altitude, it skimmed the upper mesosphere like a bird of prey trolling for fish. It was visible from the surface, a bloated, grotesque shadow as it passed before the sun. A new moon had come to the planet, and its rising was a dark omen. It declared the futility of all resistance, and the pointlessness of dreams. It was the end of hope. It was the end.

The Overfiend had come, and with him the green horde in numbers to drown a world.

On the surface, the people of the city of Reclamation gazed at the new moon as it passed overhead, and knew a great despair. The Raven Guard looked up, and knew resolve, along with a grim realism.

A being of absolute aggression was on the planet's threshold. Beneath the surface, the fragment of a shattered god responded. There were none of the deity's worshippers at hand to propitiate and redirect the inchoate hunger for war that the shard embodied. But now, near at hand were more of the beings who not only did not resist the shard's desires, but were eager for its gifts, even if they did not yet know it. They were pure. They were aggression and war and nothing else. They fed the shard with violence, and it repaid them with the capacity for even greater feats of destruction.

The shard's essence reached out and caressed the kroozer. It was drawn inside, called by the enormous potential of the creature whose will the ship obeyed. The creature was found, and mindless energy underwent a kind of ecstasy. It poured itself into the orks and, most of all, into a monster whose capacity for violence was infinite.

In the darkness of its temple, the shard vibrated and glowed. It called to the monster. It fed him and promised more. It promised him power on the same scale as his dreams of rage.

The moon of ill-omen had not just risen over the planet. It had risen over the galaxy.

Something entered the ship. Ha'garen felt it at an atavistic level. There was an apprehension of the alien and the divine, but no more. The orks had a much stronger reaction. All of them paused where they stood, and *roared*. The collective shout drowned out the machines. The roar was triumph, glee, ferocity, power. It was the sound of a species on the path to apotheosis. For a moment, the orks seemed to glow. No light shone from them, but they radiated energy in an almost palpable form. And they grew. That, Ha'garen could tell, was no illusion. Armour strained against expanding chests and swelling limbs. The footsoldiers, the greenskins that the Space Marines saw as little more than cannon fodder, suddenly had the mass and ferocity of elite units. The officers were turning into monsters of war. And the Overfiend...

Ha'garen was reluctant to apply a word to what the Overfiend was becoming. He did not want to use a word like 'god'.

The undertow was hard to resist.

The Overfiend raised his arms as if to smash the universe. His roar obliterated even that of his army. He was already twice the height of a man, and he grew larger yet. His armour sported a termagant skull on each shoulder, and looked like a disassembled Leman Russ tank. Massive steel plates covered his torso and limbs, and his lower face was protected by a jutting metal jaw. Pistons linked the joints and provided powered assist. The resemblance to a tank went beyond appearance. It must have been, Ha'garen could tell, like *wearing* a tank. And now the Overfiend expanded. For a moment, Ha'garen thought the ork was going to be crushed by his own armour. Instead, the flesh and muscle won out. The pistons were yanked from their sockets. The fastenings of the individual plates were flexible enough to withstand the pressure of the greater beast. Without the support of the pistons, the monster should have collapsed under the weight of his protection. But he stood at ease, half again as tall and wide as he had been, his fanged jaw now the same size as the metal guard. The multi-barrelled gun in his right hand seemed no more than a pistol. His left hand was an organic version of the battle claws wielded by his lieutenants.

The eldar leader had sensed the hand reaching for him, and turned at the last second. What he saw changed his mission priority. He never let up on the flamer. Eldar fire and Salamanders bolter rounds anointed the Overfiend throughout his transformation. The rounds exploded chunks of his armour, but no more. The flames were simply a baptism. Something had chosen the ork, and would not allow the moment to be tarnished.

The moment, a paltry second of chronological time, an age in the fortunes of

war, passed. Their blessing received, the orks charged with unholy energy. The Overfiend moved with a speed that belied the weight of his armour. His hand snapped around the upper body of the Fire Dragon. He lifted the eldar warrior as if hoisting a doll. He squeezed. Runic armour collapsed. The eldar jerked. Bones shattered with audible cracks. The eldar's helmet shook back and forth as if plugged into an electrical circuit. Then blood cascaded over the pauldron from beneath the helmet. The Overfiend hurled the broken doll to the ground and marched on the Salamanders.

The Fire Dragons had been exterminated. The Salamanders closed their thinned ranks around the seer.

In perfectly accented Gothic, and with the voice of despair, Elisath spoke. 'You must tell your commander to destroy this ship.'



CHAPTER EIGHT

‘If you know what just happened, tell us,’ Ba’birin told Elisath. ‘Quickly.’

The Salamanders were only metres from the exit, but taking it was no longer a viable strategy. An unending river of orks flowed in through the gate. There was no way out.

‘There is a fragment of Kaela Mensha Khaine, our god of war, on the planet. The orks respond to it, and it to them. If a being as powerful as the ork warlord were to come into direct contact with the shard, he would be invincible.’

‘He is doing a passable imitation of that state now,’ Neleus said as the Overfiend continued to shrug off bolter rounds. He was seconds away.

‘The shard is still distant. That ork is but a shadow of what he will become.’

‘He lives, and that means he can die,’ said N’krumor. He revved his chainsword and plunged through the ork ranks to meet the Overfiend, G’ova and Eligius at his heels. The sudden burst took the orks by surprise. They stumbled back before the charge, but where the blow of a storming Salamander should have stunned senseless any ork caught in its path, these creatures, touched by the ravaging divine, shrugged off the hit.

As the trio closed with the Overfiend, he reached to his left and grabbed a thick exhaust pipe that stuck out of a nearby motor. He yanked the pipe free and swung it like a massive club. It smashed N’krumor off his feet. It didn’t kill him, and his greater mass bent the pipe in two, but he went down in the midst of the horde. They fell on him with axe and sword. Eligius aimed his chainsword at the exposed joint of the Overfiend’s upper leg. He never connected. Two barrels went off simultaneously. Slugs the size of cannon shells ripped the Space Marine apart, exploding out the back of his armour and disintegrating his skull. G’ova scored a hit, slicing between armour plates and into the ork’s upper arm. Snarling, the Overfiend lowered his head and rammed into the Salamander. It

was like being hit by an iron-clad boulder with stone-column legs. The impact collapsed the right side of G'ova's armour, shattering his arm and the shell of his ribcage. His useless hand dropped his chainblade, but he stepped back, reached for his bolter and brought it up one-handed. The point-blank mass-reactive barrage made the Overfiend react, if only with yet greater rage. He smashed G'ova to the ground with the barrel of his shooter, then drove his foot onto the Space Marine's chest. A force equivalent to several tonnes punched through plate and bone, pulverising G'ova's hearts.

The supporting fire from the other Salamanders counted for nothing. Tendons bursting as if he might explode with his own power, the Overfiend seemed bigger yet. His minions were vulnerable, though, and half of the squad's fire was directed at the spot where N'krumor had disappeared. However much they had partaken of a xenos deity's communion, the orks were still blasted into chunks of meat. N'krumor staggered up from beneath a heaving, flailing mound of green. His helmet had been torn away, he was bleeding through dozens of gouges in his armour, and his left leg dragged as he lurched over the uneven surface. The Overfiend could have been upon him in a single stride, or unloaded the shooter into his back. Instead, the monster ran past him, his eyes on Elisath. He shouldered N'krumor aside with the force of a sideswiping torpedo. The Salamander pitched into the mob of cheering orks.

Ba'birin ran to his aid, ploughing through greenskins with flamer on full, flanking the Overfiend. Neleus shouted for a vox-link to the *Verdict of the Anvil*. Berengus answered that the strike cruiser was locked in combat with an ork fleet. The last moment before the Overfiend's arrival was now. Time dilated as Ha'garen ran a cold appraisal of the battlefield. He was on the ramparts of Heliosa, in the breached *Verdict* again, seeing the inevitable, searching for the least bad option. Under current conditions, the Overfiend would slaughter the Salamanders and retrieve his prisoner.

So change the conditions.

Ha'garen saw what he needed, up a gradual slope, back deeper into the hold. A few hundred metres away. Impossible but necessary. The Ha'garen he had become approved the only strategy available. The echo of the Ha'garen he had once been revelled in the madness of the act.

He grabbed Elisath with his remaining grip arm. He leaped out of the trench and onto the box, knocking the flexible pipes into idiot nods, the Overfiend one stride away. Another leap, across the trench, and he was scrabbling up the ridge of the dorsal fin. It was just thick enough for him to find his footing.

The Overfiend was upon them. He was a colossus of rage, a mountain of iron and claws, tusks and fists. He swatted Neleus aside and lunged for Ha'garen. His claws grasped at air as the Techmarine leaped again. There was no eldar grace in Ha'garen's movements. Instead, there was power and weight, and that was what he needed. From the peak of the metal fin, he passed over the heads of the nearest orks and landed midway up a teetering heap of discarded objects. Cylinders and polygons tumbled down the slope like old bones. Ha'garen scrambled up to the top of the heap and tore down the other side. He stamped hard as he ran, keeping his feet in the treacherous, sliding metal.

The orks came after him from all sides. Flamer arm raised above his head, he rotated the nozzle, surrounding himself with a continuous stream of fire, keeping the horde at bay. His chainaxe cut down any greenskin too slow or too foolish to get out of his way. Behind him, the Overfiend howled ever escalating rage. The juggernaut pounded in pursuit, the war-drum beat of his iron boots shaking the deck. 'Proximity to the shard is the source of the Overfiend's current strength,' he said to Elisath.

'It is.' The eldar clung to the servo-arm with fading strength.

'So this ship must leave Lepidus Prime's orbit.'

Elisath made a noise that was both agreement and disbelief.

'Ha'garen! In Vulkan's name, what are you doing?' Ba'birin was on the vox, his voice strained with the effort of combat.

'Acting on a surmise,' Ha'garen told him. 'But I need time.'

'And how...?'

'By fire and metal.' His target loomed ahead.

'As befits a Salamander,' Ba'birin said.

Ha'garen noted the praise, filed it, concentrated on the immediate task.

The opportunity was a gigantic blast furnace. Flames licked from the massive grill at its base. It nestled next to a mountain of scrap that rose to the roof of the hold. A conveyor belt tossed a steady stream of discards into the upper maw of the furnace. Molten metal ran in channels from the base, bathing the area in an orange-white glow. A dozen metres further on, moulds of every eccentricity received the metal and shaped it into the objects desired by the operators of the experimental station. Abandoned in the frenzy of the war, the station was a junk pile of workbenches and tables, half-completed devices and burned-out failures. The lunatic flights of orkish science were powered by an electrical station ten metres high. It was a tight group of sparking, spitting pylons and arcing generators. The tops of immense dials on the generators were barely visible

above the trash heaps, suggesting the devices were anchored to the deck itself.

Ha'garen's memory map of the power grid: there was a major node here.

He was moving fast, but the Overfiend, his momentum building, was faster. The vibrations of his footsteps were growing. He was closing.

Good.

Ha'garen used the plasma cutter on the blast furnace as he ran past, slicing it open about midway up its chimney. Gases vented, air rushed in, and reactions became uncontained. The furnace exploded. The shredded framework tore orks apart as it shrieked across the hold. A searing wave of metal fell on Ha'garen's pursuers. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the Overfiend stumble, raging at the burns that reached through his armour. He was a long way from dead, but he was brought to a stop, so he was where Ha'garen wanted him when the next thing happened.

Its base blown apart, the mountain of scrap trembled and collapsed. Metal shrieked on metal as thousands of tonnes of cataclysm swept to deck level. The Overfiend disappeared beneath the avalanche. As the creaks and roars of tumbling rubble faded, Ha'garen could hear the monster battling his way out from the metal tomb.

But Ha'garen had his lead time.

He reached the generators. He released Elisath, who collapsed against a workbench. The eldar was scorched and bleeding, but alive. Ha'garen approached the nearest generator. He pulled open a control panel and eyed the wiring inside. Monstrously crude, as ever, dangerously improvised, but somehow operational.

'Well done, brother,' Ba'birin voxed. 'We will be at your side momentarily.'

'I will be immobile and rather preoccupied,' Ha'garen told him. 'If you are able to keep me from being disturbed, I may be able to act on my surmise.'

A moment of silence, as Ba'birin wondered, perhaps, why Ha'garen did not say outright what he planned. Then he said, 'Understood.' Maybe Ba'birin had guessed, or maybe he simply realised a huge risk was involved. 'Vulkan guide you, brother.' A valediction. And an act of atonement.

'Thank you, brother.' The words were the expected ones. The correct ones to say. But even now, he still felt the disconnection from his earlier self and earlier friendships. The disconnection had not been Ba'birin's. It had been his.

What are you?

He could not pause for doubts. As at Heliosa, as on the *Verdict of the Anvil*, there was one path to follow, and he took it. This was his fire of battle, the anvil

upon which he must not break. There was no time for a prayer, only an inarticulate reaching out to the Omnisiah as Ha'garen extended his mechadendrites and plugged himself into the generator.

Into the kroozer.

As before, the ship's power grid opened before him like a nervous system hololith. As before, the ship's lifeblood was a torrent of electronic filth. The difference was that now Ha'garen did not shield himself from the ship. He did not keep his distance from its xenos insanity. He plunged into it. His consciousness fell into the bloodstream. His awareness ran everywhere. Deeper and deeper he went. He was no longer contemplating a grid. He *was* the grid. He was every electrical function of the ship. He was thousands upon thousands of individual devices. He was the useful and the broken, the vital and the trivial, the barely logical and the utterly mad. He was the distortions of technology clumsily pilfered from other civilisations, and he was the perverse creations of the orks, inventions that had no right to work but somehow did.

He was the kroozer.

What are you?

Now the question was more pertinent than ever, and more vital. The otherness of the ship was a raging torrent, and it was a vast ocean. It tried to tear him apart, and it tried to drown him in its enormity. Since his first contact with the ship, it had been eating at his soul with the slow erosion of rust. Now it had swallowed him, and if he disappeared, his body would become just another elaborate object of forgotten use in the bottom hold of the ship. He fought for his self. He fought for his soul.

What are you?

I am Ha'garen. I am a Techmarine. I am a Salamander.

Three statements. Three identities. And then the revelation, bright enough to give sight to the blind: those were not three identities. They were one. The more completely he was one facet, the more completely he was all of them. The action he was engaged in was possible because of his transformation on Mars, and he was risking the greatest self-sacrifice possible for the good of his Chapter.

With realisation came unity of identity, and with unity came strength. He remained Ha'garen as he spread throughout the ship. He fought off the alien contamination. He became a virus himself. He claimed everything. Everything became him.

He was not the kroozer. The kroozer was *him*.

He was everywhere. He knew what moved and died in his vast new body. He

felt the Overfiend rise from his metal tomb and come to kill him.

Orks swarmed the Salamanders, fighting them to a standstill. N'krumor lived, but could barely move forwards. The choice came down to leaving either N'krumor or Ha'garen on his own. Ba'birin refused the choice. 'You know the way forward, brothers,' he said. Then he followed Ha'garen's example, scrambling up the dorsal fin and hurling himself over the immediate ranks. A few metres on, and he was through any real resistance. Ha'garen had culled the enemy well.

Ba'birin came over the rise of the fallen mountain in time to see the Overfiend shrug his way free. The beast thundered towards Ha'garen, who stood motionless, tethered to a generator. Elisath tried to take the Space Marine's chainaxe from his hands, but the fists were those of a statue and not to be opened. Ba'birin charged down the slope, and while still several metres from the base, he leaped. He landed on the Overfiend's back. He hooked his knees around the Overfiend's neck, and raised his chainsword. Ork reinforcements were charging forwards, but they had some ground to cross. The avalanche had wiped out all the enemy in the immediate area. The Salamanders had time. Time enough, Ba'birin vowed, to rid the galaxy of this abomination.

He brought the chainsword down. It dug into the Overfiend's flesh, but it struggled to find a purchase.

The Overfiend swung a massive fist back. It hit Ba'birin with the force of a wrecking ball.

Ha'garen did not see well inside the ship. Random flurries of data from dozens of sensors gave him a shadowy picture of the war in the hold. He knew the Overfiend was near. He knew the ork was in combat, or else he would already be dead. He didn't know much more.

But outside the ship, his vision was crystalline. He saw the void war in all its balletic magnificence. Even the brute simplicity of the ork ship attacks took on a rough grace when seen from the multifaceted eyes of the ship. Information was an ever-shifting torrent. Updates every fraction of a second showed the changing nature of the battle. War was an accumulation of millions of variables and conflicting vectors. It was the embodiment of the contingent, and the small but unforeseen event carried more weight than the great and predicted.

He saw the *Verdict of the Anvil* at bay. The Salamanders ship lashed at the swarm. Each strike of the lance, each torpedo launch, each gun volley was

strategically placed and lethal. There were so many targets, the *Verdict* eviscerated one ork vessel after another. The void blistered with the roil of explosions, the death cries of warships. But even as the predator savaged its foe with its claws, so did it suffer its own wounds. The *Verdict of the Anvil* was bleeding. Its turns were sluggish. The flickering glow of uncontrolled fires licked at its hull. Ha'garen saw dark patches where he should have seen the flash of guns and the stab of lances. Mulcebar had bought the *Verdict* and the boarding party time, but the great, predictable event of this war was the annihilation of the Salamanders force.

Ha'garen became the unforeseen. He flexed the muscles of his new body.

The blow knocked Ba'birin down into the debris. He jumped back up, head ringing. The Overfiend had turned to face him. The ork brought his fist down hard enough to shatter marble. Iron fragments flew from the meteor impact. Ba'birin lunged, blade whirring at the Overfiend's face.

The other Salamanders had crossed the top of the hill of debris. They were almost here. They were too far. He had to give Ha'garen a few more seconds. This was the anvil on which his destiny was being shaped. He would make sure it was a worthy one. Worthy of the honour of being a Salamander.

The Overfiend's reflexes were daemonic. A massive hand snatched up Ba'birin. The grip was adamantine. Ba'birin slashed the blade across the xenos monstrosity's forehead. The Overfiend howled and crushed him into the scrap. It was like being hammered by a Dreadnought's power fist. His helmet cracked in two. The Overfiend raised his fist. Ba'birin jerked up, rolled down-slope. The fist came down on air and wreckage. Ba'birin stood and jabbed his chainsword between leg plates, sawing at the ork's tendons. The Overfiend stumbled forwards and dropped to a knee. And still he was fast. Faster than anything that huge had a right to be. He pivoted, shooter blasting out indiscriminate hell.

Fast. Too fast.

Ba'birin caught the rounds in the chest. Point blank. The first ones punched through his weakened armour. The others punched through him. Bone shattered. Hearts punctured. He felt a terrible loosening inside him as the damage overwhelmed his body's ability to repair itself. There was a strange impression of liquid, and a coldness that radiated from his core, freezing and numbing his limbs. Darkness followed the cold. He was plunging backwards into an infinite well, and the world was receding from his view.

He clung to his sight as he collapsed into a seated position. He would know if

he had succeeded.

The Overfiend loomed over him, eyes glinting triumph.

Then a terrible, echoing moan wracked the walls of the hold. There was a jerk like a mountain snapping out of sleep. The ship was moving.

Ba'birin grinned at the Overfiend. 'My brother has defeated you,' he said.

The world vanished. Ba'birin dropped into the dark and cold, and accepted their promise of rest.

Ha'garen's will seized the kroozer's engines. It seized the steering. It seized the weapon banks. He merged even more deeply with the ship. The engines fired at full, flaring second daylight over the surface of Lepidus Prime. The hull screamed from the strain. The kroozer pulled away from its prey and shot towards the fleet. Its cannons blazed at the ork ships. When it blasted the stern from a Brute, there was a moment of false calm in the war as confusion descended.

And then chaos.

Outraged crews fired at the kroozer. On other vessels, crews just as furious at the perceived mutiny unleashed savage counterattacks. Within seconds, the entire ork fleet was at war with itself. The void was filled with overlapping cannon fire and the tiny suns of disintegrating craft. From out of the disintegrating swarm came the *Verdict of the Anvil*. Bleeding oxygen and guttering fire, it ripped through the enemy ships, its lances and guns surrounding it with a halo of wrath.

Ha'garen had never had any use for chaos. It was anathema. Even its smallest, most subtle manifestation could be the sign of the Great Enemy at work. But this, this transformation of the void war, this was good. It was the routing of the Emperor's enemies. It was annihilation. It was glorious. He had done this. He, one soul, one mind, had created this vision of absolute destruction. As the first retaliatory strikes hit the kroozer, he felt a surge of incandescent aggression. The one directive of the universe was to smash and burn everything before him. Each hit on the hull was a gauntlet thrown. He would tear the enemy's heart out, he would sink his fangs into the throat of his prey, he would—

What are you?

The question was the faint but clear toll of iron on iron. The refrain had been repeated so many times, metal folded over itself again and again, hammered and hammered until it had a new unity of strength, a new identity. The question resounded with Ba'birin's voice as though he were asking it for the first time,

and it demanded an answer.

What are you?

I am Techmarine.

I am Salamander.

I am Ha'garen.

I am losing my soul.

He pulled out. The reality of the hold grasped him as he yanked his mehadendrites from the generator. He staggered, the ork taint leaving his self with reluctance. He felt shredded and hollowed out. He looked to his left and saw the Overfiend stride past Ba'birin's crumpled figure. The monster was coming to collect his prize.

The Overfiend paused. His expression changed from snarling omnipotence to enraged panic. As the ship powered away from the planet on the course Ha'garen had commanded, what had entered the orks now left, its reach overextended. Ha'garen saw the Overfiend wither before him, diminishing from god to mere monster. The hold echoed with the howl of despairing orks. The Overfiend's armour, lacking the power assist of its pistons, turned into a prison. The ork was wearing a tonne of inert iron. He toppled forwards with a booming crash.

They stared at each other for a moment, the fallen ork warlord and the Space Marine who stood only because he didn't attempt to walk. The Overfiend glared at Ha'garen with the fury of thwarted destiny. Ha'garen tried to raise a weapon, but his limbs and will were weak and drained. His servo-arms hung as motionless.

Bolter-fire hammered into the Overfiend's armour as the other Salamanders came down the hill. Their aim was thrown as a massive seizure shook the deck and the walls of the hold. The kroozer was rocked by the cannons of its own fleet. The Overfiend found the strength of desperation and struggled free of his armour. As he rose, a shell struck him in the shoulder. Instead of dropping him, it spurred him. The beast, still a gigantic monument of violence, but now raging impotence, tore past Ha'garen in a limping sprint and disappeared into the gloom of the hold.

The kroozer shook again, the battering even more insistent. The deck heaved. Towers of pointless mechanism collapsed. Even blessedly severed from his link to the ship, Ha'garen could feel it begin to die. The orks that had been charging to the aid of their ruler had lost all discipline. They were disappearing from the field of battle as quickly as they had arrived. They were routed, panicked, fleeing

the destruction of their vessel.

Ha'garen took his first step as his battle-brothers rejoined him. 'Ba'birin,' he began.

'He will live on,' N'krumor said.

Ha'garen nodded. So the harvest of Ba'birin's progenoid glands was complete.

More explosions. Somewhere in the distance, there was the ominous sound of wind. The hull had been breached. Berengus said, 'Contact from the *Verdict of the Anvil*. A Thunderhawk is on its way. It needs a location.'

The kroozer's every bolt was clear in Ha'garen's mind. He knew the ship as he knew the *Verdict*. He set aside thoughts of being tainted and said, 'There is a loading bay close at hand. One deck up.' He gave Berengus the coordinates to pass on to the Thunderhawk.

Prisoner in tow, the Salamanders plunged through the maelstrom of the agonised ship. It was as if the madness of the hold had spread throughout the hull. Corridors fell into pits of fire. Walls twisted under terminal strain and heat. Smoke choked the passageways. The light was the light of ending, flickering red and shrieking white. And filling the air was the song of a ship breaking up: a hellish choir of screaming metal punctuated by the deep, internal, fatal arrhythmia of explosions. Ha'garen led the way. There were no secrets in the iron warren any more, and he countered every blocked path with an alternative route. There was no hesitation, no delay. He had been shaped into the necessary weapon for this war, and he used the xenos knowledge to guide his brothers out of the kroozer as it succumbed to the purity of flame.

The docking bay was in the grip of a hurricane. The Thunderhawk *Mount Deathfire* had blasted its way into the bay, and the kroozer's atmosphere was pouring itself into the void. Elisath collapsed, gasping for air. Ha'garen carried him the rest of the way to the gunship.

As the *Mount Deathfire* pulled away from the kroozer, Ha'garen watched through a viewing block as the ork flagship underwent its death throes. By this point, it was no longer taking fire, and its own guns had fallen silent. Its engines were dark. It drifted now, its frame pulsing with the bursts of the fires that raced down its arteries. Those would fade, too, as the air finished venting from the dozens of breaches. It did not die with fury and glory. It burned to an ember, a broken shell. It would soon be a husk, a broken tombstone to its master's ambition.

Neleus emerged from the cockpit. He had removed his helmet, and his face was lined with exhaustion, less from the loss of his arm than from the toll of the

fallen. 'Word from our captain,' he announced. 'The ork fleet, what is left of it, is in full retreat.'

'Then the Overfiend is dead?' N'krumor asked.

'No,' Ha'garen put in. 'A retreat means they stopped fighting each other. Someone imposed order. They still have their leader.'

'Many small craft were seen escaping the kroozer,' Neleus said. 'But if he lives, his designs on this system have been crippled.' He turned his head to look at the prisoner. 'And we will destroy what was calling to the greenskins.'

Elisath said nothing. Ha'garen glanced at the eldar, and saw a being who had little to benefit from in his change of captors. He turned his attention back to the viewing block. The ork ship was going dark, disappearing into the night of the void. He was catching his last sight of Ba'birin's grave.

He asked the question on his brother's behalf. *What am I?* He knew the answer, for now, but he also knew that answer would continue to change. He had been able to kill the ship because of how much of the flesh and of the human he had surrendered. *Remember the human*, Ba'birin had said. So he would, but one could only remember what one no longer possessed. The path of this destiny was clear. He must transform. Contact with the kroozer had left him with a spiritual cancer. He felt it gnawing, and must burn it away. He must throw himself into the forge until he became the most perfect weapon in the service of his Chapter and his Emperor. Before the process was done, what had once been Ha'garen would be as dead as his brother.

But they would both be remembered.



EPILOGUE

Beneath the surface of Lepidus Prime, beneath the human city built on eldar ruins, Elisath stood before the entrance to the labyrinth. Above, in the city and in the land to the east, his kin lay in charred, blackened fragments. Their jetbikes, the emblem of the Saim-Hann way of war, were twisted, ruined mockeries of themselves. Behind him, the warriors of the human Emperor stood waiting, as monstrous and beyond entreaty as the orks.

No runes, but the future held no mystery. Now and forever, he was damned and lost.

‘Take us to it,’ the captain of the Salamanders ordered.

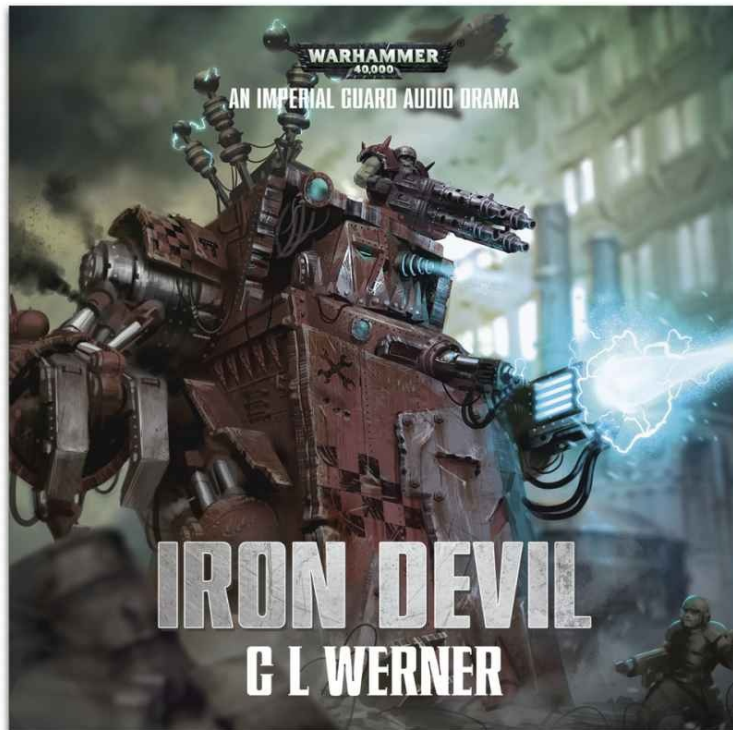
He could refuse, and rush to torture, or to the eternal embrace of She Who Thirsts. Or he could walk, and in the time he gained during the slow journey to the shard, he could pray. Pray to the splintered god. Pray that he was not the only eldar still living on this planet. Pray for a miracle. Pray for vengeance.

He began to walk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novel *Imperial Creed*, as well as the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. For the Space Marine Battles series he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

Taking refuge from deadly desert storms,
the Imperial Guardsmen of the Cadian 267th
find themselves in even more danger
as they face the might of a Morkanaut.



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Published in 2014 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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ISBN 978-1-78251-639-2

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