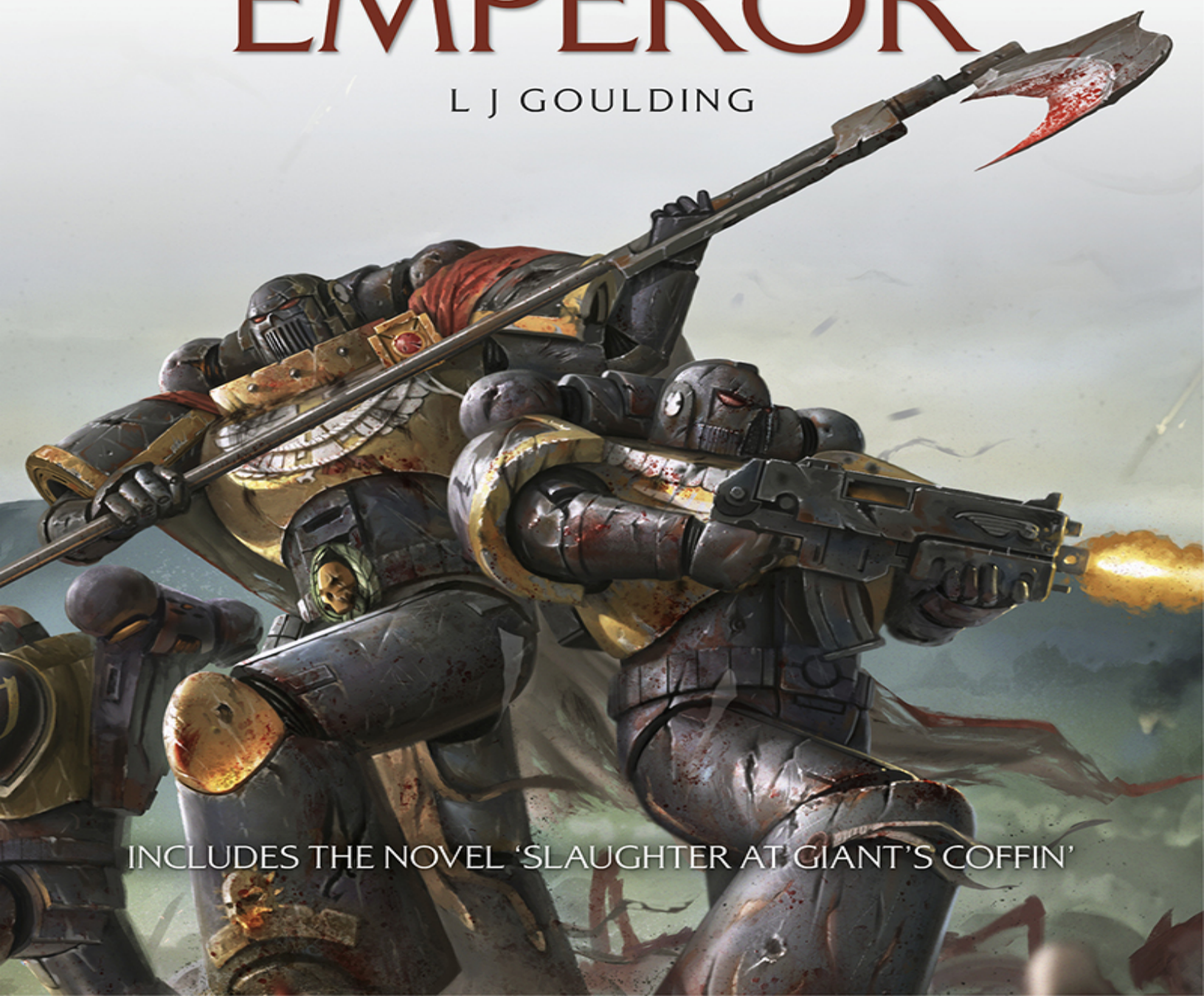


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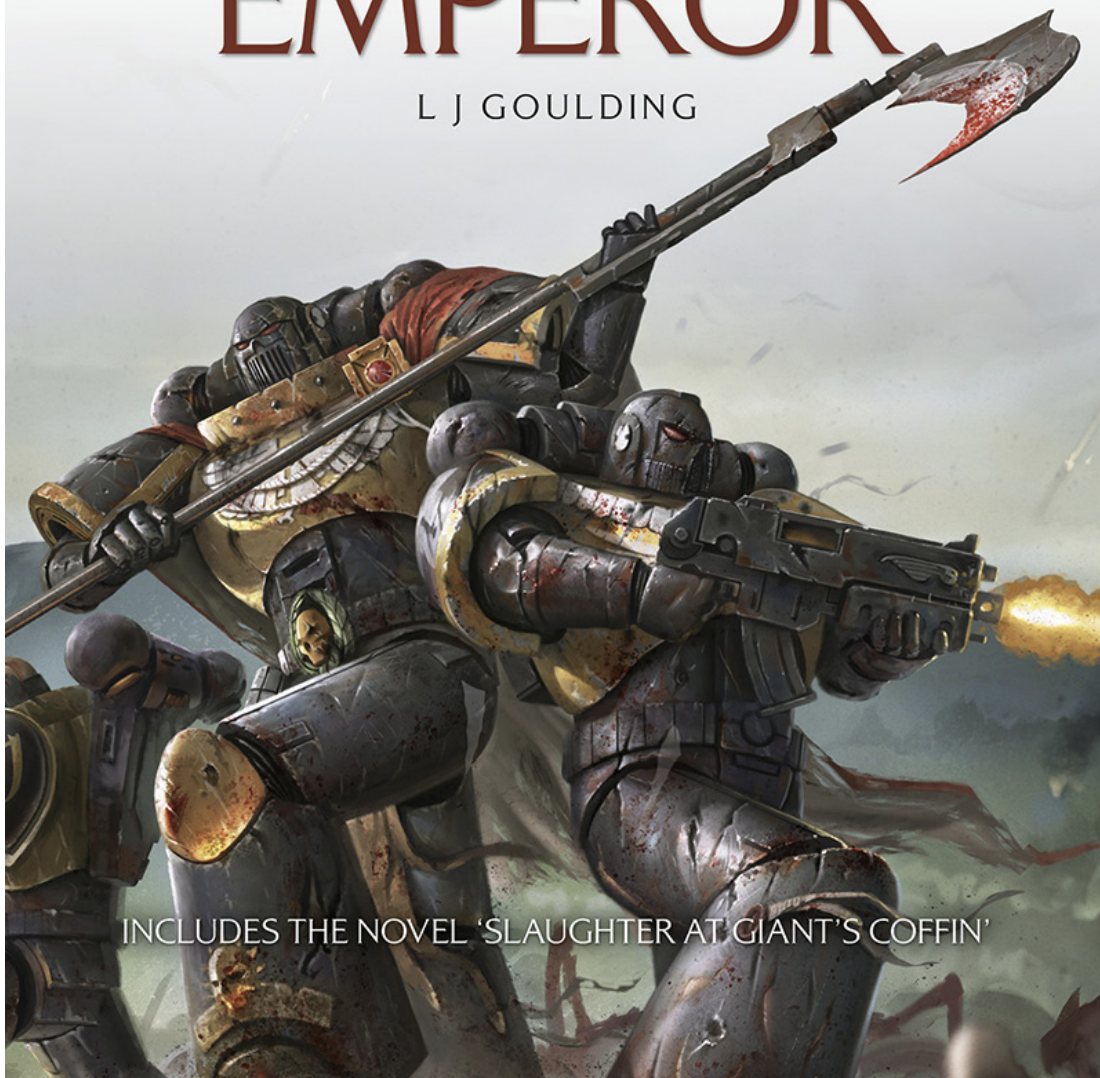
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# SCYTHES OF THE EMPEROR



L J GOULDING



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## **WARHAMMER 40,000**

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

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

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

**laughter of thirsting gods.**

# SCYTHES OF THE EMPEROR



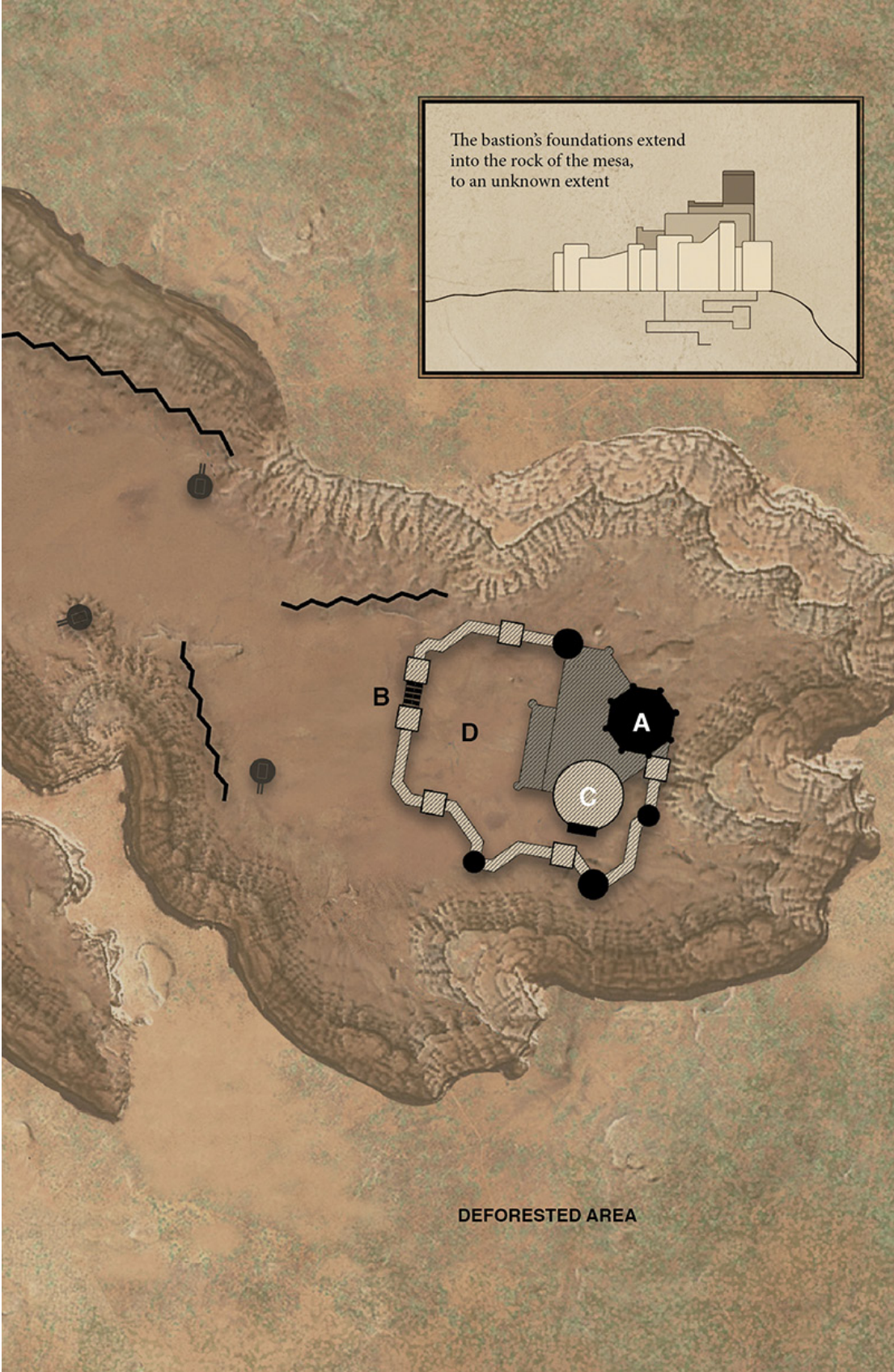
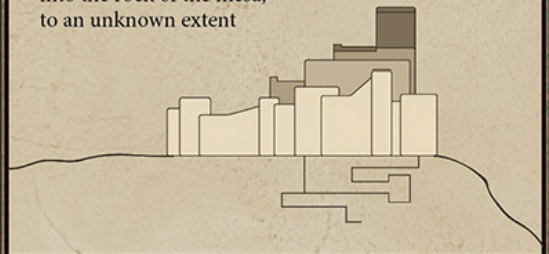
## THE BASTION AT GIANT'S COFFIN

MESA PLATEAU

- A Bastion keep
- B Barbican
- C Landing platform
- D Muster yard
- E Barricades and Aegis lines



The bastion's foundations extend into the rock of the mesa, to an unknown extent



DEFORESTED AREA

# The Sothan Horseman

Alongside devices representing Mount Pharos and the traditional, stylised bordering, the Chapter banner of the Scythes of the Emperor also bears a curious reference to the mythology of their home world, in the form of an armoured horseman. Many have questioned the provenance of such imagery over the millennia, since no record exists of any battle-brother ever having ridden to war, nor were any such creatures native to Sotha at any point in its history. From where, then, does this veneration of a noble yet abstract ideal trace its origin?

The truth of the matter is evident in the Chapter's wider heraldry, and perhaps in the respect that they afford their mortal servants. Each of the ten lesser company standards honours one of the legendarily immortal steeds so often named by the Venerable Ancient Oberdeii, even before the Third Founding – and here the white stallion Abrax, father of all horses, symbolically carries his master through the fires of battle.



# THE AEGIDAN OATH



*'I could count myself a king of infinite space,  
Were it not that I have bad dreams.'*

*– from Amulet, Prince Demark (attributed to the dramaturge  
Shakespeare), circa M2*

The strips of parchment darkened quickly upon the brazier coals, the heat curling their edges and setting hungry flames over the illuminated script that marked each one.

As the three Space Marines watched, the words of their primarch were erased. Forgotten. Consigned to the murk of history as surely as if they had never been written.

Indeed, there were those who would deny that they ever *had* been written. The laws of men had finally overridden the word of the demi-gods, and the universe seemed so much more hollow and uncaring for it.

Oberdeii stared into the fire.

'I am an oath-breaker,' he murmured to no one in particular. 'No matter what happens from this moment on, that truth will remain with me until the end of my days.'

The halls of the orbital platform were dark, the beacon lights spinning reluctantly to life only as the craft passed the atmospheric threshold. Tarpaulins hung from the gaunt silhouettes of several decommissioned shuttles, their frayed edges stirred for the first time in months by the downdraft of the Thunderhawk's manoeuvring thrusters, with empty

storage bins and cargo crates stacked well beyond the operational grid-lines marked out on the deck. The pilot, Brother Wenlocke, eyed each obstacle through the frost-rimed armourglass of the canopy, easing the gunship into position as carefully as he could in the gloom.

One of the landing struts grazed an abandoned tool bench, sending a brace of oily engine parts clattering to the floor as the dropship touched down. The Space Marine cursed.

‘This is a wretched disgrace. Could no one have cleared the landing bays for our arrival?’

Remaining where he stood behind the empty co-pilot’s seat, Segas ran his tongue over his teeth and sniffed. ‘No one knew we were coming,’ he replied, ‘and there are precious few personnel still stationed here, anyway. I doubt that cleaning up their predecessors’ mess was ever high on their list of priorities.’

Cycling the engines down, Wenlocke turned. ‘Forgive me, my lord Chaplain, but we travel with the authority of the Chapter Master himself in this matter. Does that not count for anything? We might at least have let them know the purpose of our visit ahead of time, and they could have prepared what we need.’

Segas shook his head.

‘No, brother. We cannot reveal our purpose, save in person and only to those who *must* know of it. No physical record must remain of this enterprise, regardless of the outcome.’

The pilot grunted and rose from his seat, moving his armoured bulk sideways through the cockpit to the rear hatch. Segas slid around the unmanned navigation console to meet him, recovering his skull-faced helm from the stowage locker overhead. He ran a finger over the clean edges of the Ultima engraved upon the brow, and considered all that for which it stood.

Wenlocke made to load his bolt pistol sidearm, but the Chaplain stopped him. ‘No. No weapons.’

‘And yet you will take your crozius? I’ve seen you break our foes with it, as often as lead a sermon.’

‘Aye, I will take my crozius. We will have one chance, and one chance only, to put this delicate matter right. Our primarch’s eternal legacy is at stake. That was why Chapter Master Decon sent me in his stead, and why I

brought only you.'

Pausing with one boot on the topmost rung of the descent ladder, Wenlocke frowned. 'What, because you can trust me to keep my mouth shut when awkward questions are inevitably asked? Or just because we're both old enough to remember what happens to Chapters that keep dirty little secrets from the High Lords of Terra?' Without waiting for an answer, he swung his weight out and began to climb down into the gunship's hold. 'I did as you said – I purged all navigation data from the system. There is no record of our journey left for anyone to find.'

As the grey-haired warrior disappeared from view, muttering to himself in irritation, Segas considered Wenlocke's question.

*I brought you for all of those reasons, and more besides,* he thought. *Because you and I may never return from Mount Pharos.*

The air was cold and stale, and the deck plates of the corridors felt gritty beneath the Ultramarines' armoured tread. Segas and Wenlocke met with the skeleton crew of the Sothan orbital, all mortal serf-officers of the Chapter who were long past combat retirement age. The men and women saluted stiffly, and they walked with the stilted gait of humans who had lived all their natural life in artificial gravity. They were tired, and had evidently been forgotten by the Imperium at large.

As tired and forgotten as the orbital platform itself, perhaps?

At the Chaplain's request, they arranged transit for the two Space Marines on board an anonymous cargo lighter bound for the planet's surface. The flight was cramped and uncomfortable for warriors of their size, but the need for an unheralded arrival made it a necessity.

Some kilometres outside the ordered coastal city of Sothopolis lay the freight terminals of Odessa, and it was there that they emerged into the first rays of dawn's light ready to walk the overgrown paths to the mountain.

*The mountain.*

It appeared far more impressive from the ground than when Segas had first laid eyes upon it from orbit. It towered over the distant, lesser peaks of the Blackrocks, utterly dominating the skyline. Many were the myths surrounding its dark history, and only a select few within the Chapter knew them all.

No matter how deeply Segas and Wenlocke pressed into the creaking quicktree forests, the mountain was always just visible beyond. For the most part they walked in silence, feeling faint and sporadic tremors in the earth beneath their feet.

Though it was a laughable notion, it seemed that Mount Pharos might be following their progress.

Or, at the very least, listening out for their approach.

As the day's heat grew, their path began to climb into the foothills. Without warning, Wenlocke froze mid-step – Segas saw the veteran's hand flick reflexively to the empty holster at his hip, then up in a halting gesture. Something cracked in the thick undergrowth ahead of them, and Segas' own fingers closed around the grip of his crozius maul. The two warriors edged apart, scanning for the unseen threat.

A man trudged into view, walking with a rough wooden staff in one hand and a las-lock rifle slung at his back. His clothing was simple, his frame lean, his gait assured. His tanned flesh and lined features spoke of countless summers beneath the open skies, and a wholesome life working close to the land. Only when he looked up to see the two armoured giants before him – one in cobalt blue, the other in black – did he slow his pace, his expression more vexed than alarmed.

Segas and Wenlocke held their ground, saying nothing. The man leaned on his staff, and mopped his brow with a ragged sleeve.

'Good day to you, friends. Tell me, have you seen a stray quarian pass this way?'

The Chaplain kept his voice level, his gaze as piercing as he could make it. 'Quarian?'

'Aye,' the man replied. 'Herd beast. Crafty little boggarts. They give me the slip every chance they get, up and down the hillsides.'

Brother Wenlocke looked to Segas. They both knew that the mountain was forbidden. The paths were supposed to remain untrodden by the people of Sothopolis, and yet here was a simple herdsman wandering wheresoever his animals took him. But he had a straightforward manner about him, and he held the Chaplain's eye without fear. He clearly believed that he had every right to be there. Was this, then, the famed pride of the Sothan people?

It mattered not. They did not have time to dwell upon the trespasses of

the locals, and Segas waved Wenlocke back. ‘We have not seen your beast, citizen. We cannot help you.’

The man grinned, scratching his chin. ‘Citizen, he says? Heh. You’ve never been to Sotha before, that’s for sure.’ Still showing no hint of being intimidated, he sidled up to Segas and reached out to paw at his battleplate, appraising him. ‘The Chapter, then? You’re a tall one, like the Scouts and their training sergeants. More than twenty hands from toe to tooth, I’ll bet...’

Segas remained guarded. The herdsman rapped his staff on the packed, loamy earth.

‘Do you know anything of this world, my tall friends? When I was young, the Chapter sent many Scouts. They were taught their craft on Sotha, and took what they learned to the stars, yes? They arrived as boys, but left as gelding-warriors, taller than any man from the plains or the cities. Not as tall as you two though, I think!’ He screwed his face up, thoughtfully. ‘And not as tall as the old man.’

At that, Segas leaned in sharply. ‘The old man? Another Chapter warrior, like us?’

The herdsman grinned again. ‘Aye, a gelding-lord like you, but without any pretty war-plate or badge of rank. *The old man on the mountain*, we always called him. Even before the Scouts stopped coming, he was the only one allowed up to the top of Mount Pharos. The braver lads from the herds used to help him clear the pathways, and he would tell us such tales about the horses and whatnot from his home world. But you’d never cross him. He has a fearsome manner, when he’s riled.’

Wenlocke stepped in behind the man, and placed his gauntlets firmly upon his thin, mortal shoulders, enveloping them completely.

‘This old man on the mountain,’ he whispered, ‘you know where we might find him?’

The herdsman frowned, looking from one gauntlet to the other and then back up at Segas.

‘I dare say, my tall friends, that he’ll be up at the old castellum. The ruins are hard for you to see from the air, I’ll bet. If you’d be so kind as to unhand me, I’ll take you there.’

The Aegida Castellum, Segas recalled from the Chapter’s archives on

Macragge, had been constructed during the Great Heresy as a base of legionary co-operation on Sotha. Ravaged by traitor assault and never fully rebuilt in all the centuries since, it stood now only in name upon the lower slopes, with tumbles of mossy ferrocrete strewn down the mountainside beneath it. What a casual glance might have mistaken for a rocky outcropping, Segas now saw was the overgrown remnant of a blocky, armoured keep, shot through with pale quicktree trunks and choked by vines.

Over the afternoon chorus of insects and birdcalls, there came the rhythmic threshing of a blade, and the mumbled refrain of what sounded like a work song.

Segas looked often to their guide, who seemed at times as surefooted as any quarian might be upon the uneven surfaces of the steep forest floor. Where previously he had been happy to engage the two Space Marines in inane chatter about the changing seasons and the preposterous price of a sack of grain at market, he fell to a respectful silence as they climbed the outer curtain wall of the ruins. Now that they could hear the old man's gruff voice, the herdsman had become visibly uneasy.

'I shall leave this to you, my lord Chaplain,' said Wenlocke with a bow of his head. 'As you said before, this could be *delicate*.'

Handing off his skull helm to the other warrior, Segas approached the final gate. Wenlocke followed at a distance, with the herdsman trudging warily after him. Through the fallen arch lay what had once been a courtyard or mustering ground, the flagstones now cracked with grasses and weeds.

At the far end, in the shadow of the ruined keep, the old man on the mountain toiled.

His transhuman physique had been little dulled by the centuries. Age had not wearied him as it might a mortal, yet he remained largely free of the battle scars or augmetics that one would expect upon such a venerable warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. His bare limbs were clean, his torso rippled with corded muscle, and only the neural interface ports of his black carapace broke the skin of his back. His wild, white hair was tied back, slick with the greasy sweat that covered his body and darkened his tattered breeches.

He hefted an immense agricultural scythe, oversized for his grip, with

which he cut back the vegetation. The rhythm of the sweeping, repetitive motion was a counterpoint to the song on his lips.

*‘In avis, in novas, farsoni...’* he murmured as he worked. *‘Invere, vesu ves ni vox...’*

Segas cleared his throat, and called out.

‘Brother-Captain Oberdeii, Warden of the Pharos and commander of the Ultramarines Aegida Company?’

The warrior let his scythe fall still. He straightened slowly, and turned to face the Chaplain. There, in his cold stare and not upon his physical form, were borne all the hardships of his life.

Segas came to attention, saluting him with the sign of the aquila over his breastplate. Behind him, he heard Wenlocke do the same, and waited for a response.

Oberdeii stared at them for a long while, the butt of his scythe resting upon the ground. He showed no sign of recognition at their livery, nor even the Ultima adorning it. Segas began to wonder if they had made a mistake in coming unannounced after all, and whether or not they would live to take word of it back to Macragge.

Reaching up slowly to smooth his long whiskers, the aged captain’s gaze moved to the mortal cowering in the archway. ‘You,’ he barked. ‘I remember you. You are called Bennis. You brought me milk when my bovid was taken by the rot.’

The herdsman let out a gasp of relief. ‘Yes! Many years ago, I think you mean, when I was a boy.’ He patted the strap of the las-lock on his back. ‘You taught me the best way to hold a rifle, as thanks, and—’

‘Shut your mouth,’ Oberdeii growled. Bennis did not need to be told twice.

Segas looked to the captain’s chest, and the twin-scythe emblem tattooed in faded golden ink across it. He saw the afternoon sun glinting from the curve of the actual blade at Oberdeii’s shoulder, and recalled the provenance of that simple icon – the noble Sothan martyrs that it represented, the soldiers who had been farmers, and who had always intended to be so once again.

Oberdeii glowered at him in return.

‘Who are you? A Chaplain?’

‘Yes, my lord. I am Brother-Chaplain Segas of Second Company. My

companion here is Veteran-Brother Wenlocke.’

‘Hnh. What do you want? As you can see, I have work to do.’

This was it, Segas realised. This was the moment. He steeled his nerve, feeling the weight of a thousand years of Ultramarian glory resting firmly upon his shoulders.

‘Brother-captain,’ he declared, ‘by the authority of the Lord Macragge, ruler of Ultramar, we are here to relieve you of your command here on Sotha.’

The wooden snath of Oberdeii’s scythe creaked as he tightened his grip on it. ‘No you aren’t,’ he spat. ‘Your Lord Macragge *has* no authority in this. Only one individual could release me from my oath, and he’s dead.’

Caution. Segas had advised caution from the start. He cleared his throat again.

‘My lord Oberdeii, I understand that this must come as—’

Oberdeii let out a wordless roar, and snapped the wooden haft of the scythe between his immense hands. In spite of himself, Segas flinched even as he heard the whimpering Benvis fleeing back down the forest path and away to what he probably considered safety.

‘Do not speak to me,’ Oberdeii bellowed. ‘You understand nothing. I am the last Lightkeeper...’ He began to trail off, frowning. ‘Though... no light comes from Sotha anymore...’

*A curious turn of phrase, under the circumstances,* Segas thought. Nonetheless, he stiffened into a deferential bow.

‘You have upheld your oath, brother-captain – none could ask for a more worthy guardian. But this world no longer requires the protection of the Aegida Company.’

Oberdeii’s jaw worked silently for a moment. ‘If you want my command,’ he mumbled, ‘then you’ll have to take it from me. I won’t yield without a fight. You can’t deny me that.’

It was an honourable enough request, Segas had to admit. A ritual duel, against a living legend of the Great Heresy, no less. He turned to Wenlocke for approval, though the veteran was eyeing the broken scythe that remained in Oberdeii’s hand, and the edge of the wickedly sharp blade that still glinted in the sunlight.

Nevertheless, the Chaplain nodded. ‘Very well then, my lord. I shall stand as Chapter Master Decon’s proxy in this, and let the matter be decided

between us in combat. Brother Wenlocke will— ’

The blow was devastating. It lifted Segas from his feet and sent him sprawling to the broken flagstones in a clatter of plate, ears ringing, his vision hazed red.

Oberdeii stood over him.

‘Get up.’

Gaping and blinking, Segas tried to shake the dullness from between his temples. He hadn’t even seen the old warrior move. Wenlocke stepped forwards to help him to his feet, but Oberdeii shot the veteran a look that would have reduced a mortal to panicked tears.

‘What do you think you’re doing, *boy*? This is what he agreed to.’

Without breaking his gaze, he drew back one bare foot and kicked the Chaplain squarely in the face, snapping his head around. Blood splattered onto dusty stone, and Segas let out a pained gasp. ‘S-Stay back, brother...’ he managed, between coppery gulps that caught in his throat.

Wenlocke shook his head, backing away slowly. ‘This is lunacy.’

Segas rolled onto his hands and knees, with Oberdeii pacing around him. The captain twitched and murmured to himself, twisting the scythe blade free of the broken haft and holding it like a falx. ‘This is *my* duty, *my* honour...’ he hissed. ‘And my worthiness is not for the likes of you to judge...’

As Segas brought one unsteady foot underneath himself, he reached for the crozius arcanum at his belt once more. Oberdeii froze, his improvised blade ready.

‘Better make it count, Chaplain. You’ll get one chance. One chance only.’

It was true. Segas knew now that Oberdeii would kill him – and Wenlocke immediately after – if he could. To him, this was no merely symbolic duel for the sake of saving face.

This was the only honour that the old captain had left. For that, Segas found that he pitied him.

The Chaplain rose painfully, activating the maul’s power field and holding it in a guard position. His words came at first in a slur. ‘Forgive me, my lord. I was given this task, though in truth I feel blessed to journey here and meet you in person.’ He took one last, steadying breath. ‘Long have I made study of the Chapter’s hidden records – I know who you are, and what you have done for the Imperium.’

Oberdeii hesitated only a moment before he lunged, the blade moving in a masterful feint intended to bring him inside Segas' guard and strike for his vulnerable neck-seal.

But this time, the Chaplain was ready.

He stepped the same way as Oberdeii and jabbed at the base of his opponent's skull with the head of the crozius. There was a bright flash and a crack of percussive energy discharge that threw them apart. Had Segas dialled the weapon's power field for anything more than minimal output, it would likely have blown the captain's head from his shoulders.

As it was, Oberdeii stumbled forwards, failing to regain his footing before crashing down onto his side, stunned and wracked by fading neural tremors. Spittle foamed at the corner of his mouth, and his right eye was bloodshot as it rolled in its socket. Wenlocke reluctantly moved to aid the stricken officer, kicking the scythe blade out of reach.

From a distance, Segas ran two fingers of his gauntlet across the back of his head where the captain's wild slash had caught him. They came away traced with cinnabar-red, his genhanced physiology already clotting the ugly gash in his scalp.

He looked down at Oberdeii, and saluted him with the crozius.

'As I said, my lord – please forgive me, but you are relieved of your command.'

When the captain had taken water and regained his senses, the three of them climbed the mountain together. Wenlocke, usually quick to voice any discontent or to join in someone else's conversation, remained quiet. He listened intently as Segas put various questions to Oberdeii, and the embittered captain gave such replies as he saw fit.

At times, those replies bordered on the nonsensical, and neither Segas nor Wenlocke believed this was entirely the result of a powered blow to the head. Yet it was clear that even the most curious eccentricities of 'the old man on the mountain' carried the weight of years and experience in them.

'I have learned much in my time,' Segas mused as they neared the summit, 'from the writings of such luminaries as Lamiad, Corvo and Prayto. But here I am, walking with another great hero of our Chapter – one who stood at their side, in their finest hour, and spoke with them as easily as we speak now, and yet lives still among us.'

‘I am no hero,’ Oberdeii grunted.

‘Come now, brother-captain. You—’

‘No hero,’ he repeated, firmly. ‘I did what was asked of me, without question, knowing that to do so would deny me any future glory. No warrior of the Legion was ever a hero simply for doing what was expected of him...’ His attention began to wander again, as it had several times already during their ascent. ‘They say, “Only in death does duty end”. But my name will never appear on any roll of honour, no monument to the Legion *or* Chapter.’

Segas nodded. ‘Such was the solemnity of your duty, and the secrecy of your appointment to it. Even so, there is a great deal written of you, in the grand Library of Ptolemy on Macragge.’

Oberdeii shrugged. ‘Never heard of it. Never been to the capital world.’

‘It is a wondrous sight, brother-captain – the greatest of archives, save for those of the Imperial Palace itself on holy Terra. It was named for the first presiding master of the old legionary Librarius, and has been much expanded in the centuries since. Though my calling has ever been to the Reclusiam and the righteous soul of our Chapter, I am often drawn to the halls of the great library in the course of my duties. It represents the sum total of all Ultramar’s knowledge, culture and philosophies. And its histories, both remembered and... *otherwise*.’

Unease welled up in Segas’ gut. He was not used to discussing such things openly, though he knew that, in all likelihood, Oberdeii was privy to far more dangerous secrets than he. The Chaplain glanced sidelong at Wenlocke, who glanced at them both in turn before mouthing a silent prayer and touching his fingertips to the golden crux upon his breastplate.

‘I feel that we need not be coy, you and I,’ Segas went on, putting his concern aside. ‘There is a place within the Library of Ptolemy wherein lie the two halves of our primarch’s legacy. The first is the great *Codex*, the foundation of the Adeptus Astartes penned by his own noble hand. Such an important work can never be lost or allowed to fall into the hands of our enemies, and so it is watched over night and day by tireless guardians. Guardians much like yourself, in fact.’

Oberdeii did not visibly respond. He continued to place one callused foot in front of the other, loose stones skittering from his tread and away down the mountainside.

‘The other half is similarly guarded, though for very different reasons. There has been much debate in recent years, between Chapter Master Tigris Decon and his inner circle, as to whether we should purge it from the library altogether. Some urge him to do so, to rid ourselves and our successors of the only remaining proof of Lord Guilliman’s failure and folly during the Great Heresy. Others would seek to remind Master Decon that to destroy our past would blind us to the lessons we might come to learn from it.’

‘And you, Chaplain? What do you say?’

Oberdeii’s question caught Segas off guard. He considered his response carefully.

‘My lord, I believe that such an unadulterated truth can present nothing other than a serious liability to the honour of our Chapter. The Imperium loves and cherishes the Ultramarines, and the memory of Roboute Guilliman, wisest of all the Emperor’s sons. We are beyond reproach.’ He raised a finger. ‘But only as long as all knowledge of Imperium Secundus is kept from the rest of the galaxy. The archive record contains every surviving document and source relating to those confusing times, and it could shatter the reputation of our primarch and the credibility of everything he has done for the Imperium since. Can you imagine if even the hallowed *Codex Astartes* were to be branded as the work of a heretic, one only revealed centuries after his demise?’

‘You would destroy it, then?’ Oberdeii looked to him expectantly for an answer.

‘No,’ Segas replied, holding the captain’s gaze. ‘At this stage, what would be the point?’

The sunset kissed the peak of Mount Pharos as they emerged onto a jutting promontory. As below at the castellum, the remains of a fortress clung to the rock above, nonetheless seeming almost to graze the heavens with its crumbling ramparts. A fortified gate, cracked and weather-beaten, led inside the mountain itself.

‘The Emperor’s Watch,’ said Oberdeii. ‘You will know its name from the archives, Chaplain.’

Indeed, he did.

With the world spread out before them, Wenlocke and Segas paused to take it all in, and were rendered speechless by the legendary beauty of

Sotha. Beyond the forests and the Blackrock range, they could see all the way past Odessa to the hills of the Chrepan region, and the tiny lights of some secondary township growing far from Sothopolis. To the east, night was falling for true over the ocean, and the first stars were already visible in the sky.

Oberdeii sat upon the bare ground, disinterested. Next to that breathtaking vista, he appeared smaller. Older, even.

‘I did not ask for this,’ he muttered. ‘I did not ask to linger on, long after everyone I have ever known has fallen to the reaper’s blade. No glory for Oberdeii, no foes to face – can you imagine that? The misery of a former legionary who cannot die as he was meant to, on the end of a sword or to a well-aimed bullet. We are made too well. A life without war makes us immortal. Our bodies endure, though our spirits may wither...’

He looked up, his expression suddenly haunted.

‘I don’t want to live forever. I see too much.’

Something in the captain’s tone made Wenlocke turn. Segas marked it well. He stepped closer.

‘Brother-captain, do you speak of the xenos device?’

Oberdeii rolled his eyes, and shifted his weight. ‘It is nothing. I don’t hear their voices anymore.’ He looked up into the darkening sky overhead. ‘You would not understand. You young warriors of the Chapter are of a different time. I don’t like to think what the primarch would make of his own sons, now. The songs of Ultramar have fallen flat without him to lead us.’

He got to his feet slowly, as though such dour thoughts alone could age him. He looked at Wenlocke, and let his stare slide into the empty space beyond, his eyes dimming with memory.

‘He stood there, where you stand now. Roboute Guilliman, the Avenging Son, stood in that exact spot over nine centuries ago, and addressed me and my battle-brothers. When I learned of his death, I stood in the same spot again and mourned his passing with a few quiet words. If you had ever known him, ever heard his voice, then you would not question his legacy. Master Decon would not consider himself the lord of Macragge. Not one of us who remains is worthy to question the eternal will of our primarch. Not one.’

The evening breeze brought with it a new chill. Oberdeii closed his eyes

and breathed deeply.

‘I’m not mad,’ he muttered. ‘I know what I am to you, to the Chapter. I am a living, breathing reminder of what you consider, in your vanity, to be Lord Guilliman’s mistakes. You could not erase them from the pages of history while I remained here on Sotha, oathed to the final duty that he gave me. Not even if you burned every library on every world.’

Segas said nothing. He was relieved that, one way or another, the captain had arrived at this realisation for himself.

Oberdeii shook his head. ‘But what was my oath, Chaplain? Do you even know? Is *that* recorded in the archive?’

‘It is. You are the captain and last surviving member of the Aegida, a division of the Ultramarines Chapter whose origins can be traced back to the days of the Thirteenth Legion, whose very existence contravenes our primarch’s own law. For reasons known only to a select few, Lord Guilliman saw fit to maintain a phantom *eleventh* company on Sotha even as he forced every other Chapter to conform to the Codex model of ten. Quite aside from the secret shame of Imperium Secundus, the existence of the Aegida Company could be seen as proof of his wilful and deliberate flouting of Imperial decree – a decree that he and his surviving loyal brothers agreed upon only after much conflict. The Second Founding of the Adeptus Astartes was all that kept the dream of a unified Imperium alive, after the Great Heresy.’

Grimly, Segas drew his crozius once more, and held it before him.

‘To say that a revelation of this sort would be a scandal for our Chapter does not even begin to cover it. We and all our Successors would be cast out, the defenders of mankind would be divided and the Imperium would tear itself apart all over again. You are not simply the reminder of a mistake, my lord – you are the embodiment of it, and the last scrap of living proof. The time has come for the Aegida itself to be purged.’

Regarding the Chaplain’s winged sceptre of office, Oberdeii shook his head. ‘Why now? What has changed? What has rattled Tigris Decon?’

Rather than Segas, it was Wenlocke who replied. ‘It must be now, my lord, because the Ultramarines will soon fall under the scrutiny of the High Lords once more. There is to be a Third Founding.’

Oberdeii snorted, though there was no trace of humour in it. ‘A *third*? That is impossible.’ He made the sign of the aquila with trembling hands.

‘Who dares to suggest such a thing? Now that our Lord Guilliman is gone and cannot protest it, who has led the Imperium to consider this... this... shallow heresy?’

Wenlocke and Segas shared a hesitant glance. Oberdeii sagged.

‘Dorn,’ he whispered, the realisation breaking him. ‘It could only be Dorn. Such a pale imitation of our primarch’s greatest achievement.’

Segas nodded. ‘Lord Dorn, brother to our departed father, brought this before the High Lords more than forty years ago. The preparations have already begun. Petitions have been filed, Chapter assets marked and divided. The Adeptus Mechanicus has pledged a thousand new—’

‘We are too few,’ Oberdeii interrupted him. ‘The Ultramarines, the Fists, the Angels – we are each only a thousand strong at best. From nine loyal Legions were the Chapters born, and our father did not even live to see the Successors reach full strength in a hundred years.’ He gestured to the Sothan horizon, from east to west, and then to the stars above. ‘I have seen it, brothers. I know how long it takes to turn raw neophytes into seasoned battle-brothers, and no one better. You speak of the Aegida dividing the defenders of mankind? This “Third Founding” will leave the first nine Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes without teeth, mired in petty mortal bureaucracy for another century or more.’

Segas raised his hands placatingly. ‘Brother-captain – I should tell you that Rogal Dorn has urged the High Lords to grant writs of succession to the Second Founding Chapters as well. Any, in fact, that have the veterans, gene-seed reserves and materiel to support them. Over a hundred have already been approved, with the same number again currently being assayed.’

Oberdeii was rendered almost speechless. ‘Shallow heresy...’ he said again, his voice barely a whisper.

‘Regardless of how you may feel about this matter, my lord, this is the moment that Chapter Master Decon has chosen for us to act. We will dissolve the Aegida Company, quietly, under the cover of this new founding. You are to be released from your oath to the primarch.’

The venerable captain whirled around, his hands balled into fists.

‘Never!’ he spat. ‘You do not have the authority! Not even Dorn can command this! Take the Aegida. Take it and pretend it never happened. Paint over the dark stain on our spotless history, and return to your “Lord

Macragge” and tell him you did as you were told. But I will not abandon my duty. I will not leave Sotha unguarded. Her people have earned that much, at least.’

Segas sighed. It would come to the final choice, then.

He reached to his belt and produced a gilded scroll, sealed with the haloed Ultima of Macragge, and unfurled the freshly scribed vellum within.

‘This is a writ of succession for the Ultramarines Chapter, one of nine already approved by Terra. You will notice that the minutiae have been left incomplete.’ He offered the scroll to Oberdeii, but the captain did not take it. Segas shrugged. ‘Two courses of action remain open to you, my lord. As a mark of respect, for all that you have given and sacrificed for Macragge, Master Decon is willing to approve your immediate transfer to the Fifth Company. You would be assigned to new combat operations focused on the fringes of Old Ultramar, with an exceptionally high probability of glorious martyrdom. Your days will end, on the battlefield, as an Ultramarine. Only in death does duty end.

‘The alternative is that you abandon your old oath, here and now, and sign your name instead upon this scroll. You will become the founding Master of the Aegida Chapter, noble Successors of the Ultramarines. I will join you, along with Brother Wenlocke and seventy-two other appointed veterans of the Orlan Conquest. We will take Sotha as our home world, and defend Mount Pharos from all threats, from now until the end of all things.’

Oberdeii stared at the vellum scroll. He did not seem to be considering the offer so much as attempting to disbelieve it.

‘You don’t understand,’ he muttered. ‘The Aegidan oath I swore to the primarch was not to protect Mount Pharos from the enemies of the Imperium.’

Segas faltered. His mind leapt back to the archives, the many affidavits, records and testimonials that he had curated in his years of study, every second spent in contemplation of this very moment. What had he—

Gesturing to the fortified gateway in the bluff beneath the Emperor’s Watch, Oberdeii answered the question before the Chaplain could ask it.

‘My oath was to protect Sotha from the Pharos itself.’

With those words, the yawning maw of the gate seemed wider and darker

than before.

The vaults began as smooth stone, crafted and embellished in the blunt Imperial style. Lumen orbs hung in delicate brass cradles, illuminating the chambers and votive spaces that opened up on either side. This, Segas supposed, had been the work of the Imperial Fists after Sotha was retaken from traitor forces – austere and functional, but artisan-crafted with the strength of rock and steel upon which the VII Legion had built their unyielding legacy.

Soon, this strength gave way to the rough framework of a template in construction. The ancient scaffold and incompletely hewn masonry ended with a graceless step down to the glassy, obsidian surfaces of the mountain's interior.

At Guilliman's command, Rogal Dorn's sons had been building their new fortress within a far older labyrinth of unknown design.

Why had they ceased their labour so abruptly?

The deeper the three of them trudged into the darkness, their way lit now only by Segas' and Wenlocke's suit lamps, Oberdeii became visibly more agitated. He glanced up and down the tunnel every few moments, muttering to himself.

'He thinks me mad? It is enough that I know... and that I uphold it above all else...' He bent to examine cracks in the smooth, black curve of the rock, then called out with a forced levity. 'Would you believe, eh, these walls used to heal themselves? I saw it with my own eyes, many times. But not anymore. Not after the primarch tore out the mountain's heart.'

A barely perceptible tremor, nothing more than a low vibration, shuddered through the ground beneath their feet. Oberdeii's eyes widened in the gloom.

'And yet, the heart still tries to beat...'

Segas removed his gauntlet, placing one hand upon the tunnel wall. The rock was icily cold.

'Do not concern yourself with the local superstitions, my lord – the mountain and even the distant Blackrocks have long suffered from geological instability. Tectonic shifts are to be expected.'

Oberdeii shook his head, pushing past the Chaplain and leading them onwards. 'When he returned to Ultramar after the war was lost and won,

Lord Guilliman ordered the Pharos destroyed. The Mechanicum priests carved up the quantum pulse engines like a feast-day fowl, and carted thousands of tonnes of xenos machinery out into the light of day, spiriting it all away to their secret vaults across the galaxy for further study. There was so much of it. Too much to even think about taking it all, not with the short time we had. No one knew how it could just keep on coming, and coming.'

He tapped himself on the chest, where the twin-scythe tattoo was just visible beneath his jerkin. The hurt pride in his voice was mixed with a note of trepidation.

'I could have told them. I've seen further than most.'

The angle of the tunnel grew steeper, and they had to steady themselves against the slope of the floor. Oberdeii moved with many lifetimes' familiarity, helping Wenlocke to find the best footholds. Still, he seemed distracted.

'The locals used to have their superstitions – my brothers and I used to sit with the herdsman in the outer halls, as they tried to sing the mountain to sleep. But it was never the same as it had once been.' He fixed Segas with that same wide stare as the ground trembled again. 'So don't tell me that those vibrations are natural tectonic activity. That doesn't explain why they are always the exact same frequency, and the same duration. The mountain doesn't sleep... and nor do I...'

Segas took Oberdeii by the arm. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't sleep. I never sleep. You wouldn't either.'

Even Wenlocke halted at that. 'You haven't slept since you swore your oath to the primarch?'

'Give or take. Catalepsean slumber, but never true sleep. I always like to keep one eye on the mountain.' The captain smiled for the first time since they had ventured beneath the surface. 'And besides, I don't like the things I see in my dreams.'

Segas saw the incredulous look in Wenlocke's eye. An explanation was in order.

'Brother, the venerable captain was known to experience visions, precipitated by his connection and proximity to Mount Pharos – this was verified by many, including the primarch himself. Both times the young Oberdeii's most vivid dreams went unheeded, and both times he was

proven correct. He foresaw the arrival of the Blood Angels Legion at Ultramar, and he also foresaw the invasion of Sotha by traitor forces.'

Oberdeii twitched. 'I was just a neophyte. But even now, nearly a thousand years later, those visions remain. Has my whole life been a dream? And if so, whose dream is it...? They saw our light... in the dark between the stars...'

Segas felt his hearts sinking. This old warrior was not fit to lead a Chapter of the Emperor's finest. His centuries away from the Chapter, denied a life of battle and instead given the thankless task of clearing undergrowth with his bare hands, had clearly taken their toll. These frequent babbling rants were proof enough of that.

What had Segas agreed to?

They continued down the incline in silence, until Oberdeii pointed out a smear of dark grey against the blackness of the tunnel. 'There,' he sighed. 'Shoddy work, and inelegant compared to what was built on the surface. But time was short and Lord Guilliman's patience was at an end.'

The way ahead levelled out into a much broader space – not in the natural curve of the passageway, but with a rising blockage that edged all the way up to the ceiling. Their armoured boots struck the uneven surface with dull thuds as they stepped out onto it.

'Ferrocrite,' Wenlocke murmured. 'Poured down here? Why?'

'To seal the mountain,' Oberdeii replied, inspecting the edges of the tunnel where the join was most noticeable. 'To keep everything down there... *down there*. The serf labourers poured millions of tonnes of 'crete into the main tributary tunnels. That was the primarch's last word on the matter of the Pharos, and it is one for which I am thankful.'

'Aye!' Wenlocke snorted. 'If anything yet lives down there, in the depths, then it must squirm and writhe in dark places that no man or primarch has ever—'

Oberdeii turned slowly to face him. His glare was cold and fierce.

'Do not speak of such things. Not here. Not in this place.'

Aside from the low, broad arch of the chamber's sloping vault, the only other feature was a plain stone bier, set with a brazier on the ferrocrite floor before it. Oberdeii approached it reverently, striking a flame into the bowl with a simple flint and rasp.

As the oiled tinder took, the flickering light revealed what lay upon the

bier's top.

An iron mask, worked into the semblance of a skull.

The metal was pitted with age, but had been kept polished and oiled through the centuries. Unaccountably, the sight of it sent a chill into Segas' hearts. There was something there, something in the emptiness of the eye sockets, in the stylised line of the jaw that was neither a grin nor a grimace.

'The mask of Barabas Dantioch, first Warden of the Pharos,' Oberdeii murmured. 'A loyal hero of the Great Heresy, by Guilliman's own decree. I live in the shadow he has cast upon this place, in more ways than one, though I can never hope to be so worthy of the title of Warden.'

Beneath the mask were three strips of decrepit parchment, fixed to the bier with wax that had become little more than a discoloured crimson bruise upon the stone. The imprint of the Ultima of Macragge was barely visible in the seal.

'You knelt here?' Segas asked, his voice feeling weak with awe. 'You took the knee before our primarch and made your oath, at the threshold of the Pharos itself?'

Oberdeii nodded. He ran his fingertips over the fine calligraphic script that adorned each of the oath papers. 'Aye. The primarch drew his blade, the *Gladius Incandor*, and I swore the Aegidan oath upon it. By the flames of this brazier was the seal made, by his own hand.'

Brother Wenlocke sank to one knee, his head bowed before the bier and the artefacts laid upon it. The captain regarded him curiously, but continued.

'And now young Master Decon urges me to make a simple choice – a choice between surrendering my rank and my life, or continuing to watch over this place as something I am not. You tell me that I cannot remain an Ultramarine and still act as Warden of the Pharos, as the noble primarch appointed me.'

Segas considered his words. 'I had not thought to put it so, captain. But yes, that is the essence of it.'

By the glow of the brazier, Oberdeii appeared differently, like some haunted phantasm of the abyss. 'No good will come of this, Chaplain Segas,' he said grimly. 'Mark my words – I am as certain of this as anything I have ever known. This lie that you craft will be the death of all

that Guilliman strove to accomplish.’

He reached out and plucked the oath papers from the seal, the wax yielding easily, and what little of the Ultima that remained visible was broken.

‘Pray that our primarch never awakens from his deathly slumber, or we shall know his wrath.’

Segas stoked the brazier, the ashes of the oath papers crumbling as they were ground between the smouldering coals. He saw the grief in Oberdeii’s eyes.

‘Think of it not as the breaking of an oath, but a renewal of the same. When you swore upon the primarch’s blade and your own, the galaxy was a very different place.’ He rose, and placed a hand upon the captain’s shoulder. ‘But I am glad you have chosen this path. The Imperium is changing, and we shall change with it. The past will soon be forgotten, and the future is not what it used to be.’

Oberdeii did not respond. Brother Wenlocke reached for the iron mask upon the bier, and presented it to his new Chapter Master. ‘Hail to you, my lord – Warden of the Pharos in perpetuity, and Master of the Aegida Chapter!’

The proclamation hung in the silence of the sealed chamber for a moment. The trace of a frown crossed Oberdeii’s brow.

‘No. That name is gone also. Gone with my fallen brothers, and my primarch.’

Segas handed him the writ of succession, and a matrix-quill. ‘It is to you, then, Master Oberdeii. By what name shall we bring death to the foes of mankind?’

Absently, the Chapter Master raised a hand to the tattoo over his heart. His jaw was set, his voice low.

‘The Aegida was the shield, but no more. Sotha shall not be defended, but shall strike at the darkness before it can grow, and reap a bitter harvest. Put out the call to the proud men and women of this world – they have earned the right to fight and bleed and die alongside any warrior of this Chapter, and their sons shall be our brethren. Let them turn their ploughshares into swords, and stand with us as equals.’

A fire was kindled in Segas’ hearts by Oberdeii’s words, and the Chaplain

watched as he put his mark upon the vellum.

‘If I am to be damned then it shall be on my own terms, and red with the blood of my foes. We stand no longer as the Emperor’s shield, brothers, but as his noble Scythes.’

SLAUGHTER AT GIANT'S  
COFFIN

Understand.

Understand that this is not a beginning, but an ending.

The fate of the Scythes of the Emperor was not sealed when the xenos devoured the Chapter's home world of Sotha. Nor was it by the arrival of the Kraken in the outer worlds of the Sotharan League, nor even Fifth Company's doomed expedition that seemingly provoked it. Such things were already in motion even before Mansirius Thorcyra was named as Chapter Master.

The ancients held to the truth: '*What's past is prologue.*'

Understand, then, that the prologue to this tale has been almost ten thousand years in the making, and that the sons and daughters of Sotha cannot hope to escape their past.

And it is enough to know that the Scythes have already suffered greatly for it.

*'The sky-giants came out of the darkness. They were strong, and had many good tools and weapons that they found in caves behind the stars. They had hunted everything there was to hunt in the other lands, and they knew this meant they could never grow any stronger. So they decided to come to Miral and create new beasts to hunt.*

*'When they looked at the soil and the rocks and the water and the sunlight, they imagined all the monsters from their old legends, and put them together to make new monsters. They grew the trees to be hungry, and the grasses to be sharp. Then the giants looked at the new land they had shaped, and knew that it would test them, and that this would be their new home.*

*'But the beasts they had made were too quick, and too smart, and one by one the sky-giants were killed by the things they had made. The last giant buried all of his brothers in a great stone pile in the heart of the jungle, and he stood on the top and cried out, "Come, monsters! I am here! No one is left to bury me, so kill me and eat me, and I will make you stronger! That is the way of the sky-giants!"*

*'And the beasts came, and they killed him, and they ate him, and they grew stronger.*

*'Many years came and went, and men came to live in the caves of the giants' stone coffin. These men were quick*

*and smart like the beasts of the jungle, and in time they grew strong from the hunt.*

*'We are the men of Miral. We are the children of the sky-giants, and we are the true masters of this world.'*

- creation myth of the indigenous Mirali culture, in their oral tradition (translated into Gothic by unknown Chapter recruit)



# CHAPTER ONE

## EVACUATED

From out of the darkness, they came.

The blunted prow of the battle-barge *Heart of Cronus* split the veil of reality first, the strange angle of her re-entry a testament to the haste with which she had been hurled into the warp. The great ship juddered and pitched to starboard with the sudden deceleration, even as her escort frigates began to emerge about her. Strike cruisers and destroyers all jostled for the clear void as they tumbled from the empyrean, proximity alarms wailing and countless helmsmen fighting to bring their vessels back under control.

It was shambolic. Frantic.

Mortal voices, strained by emotion, echoed back and forth across the open vox; each shipmaster cursed the apparent ineptitude of his peers as the fleet spread out into what might pass for an operational grouping.

Nonetheless, in the fierce light of the Miral star, their transhuman masters tried to carry themselves with as much dignity as they could muster. To anyone who might have been watching, it was a most unusual sight – that of a mighty Space Marine Chapter humbled and brought low by its foes, its brothers resisting the urge to lash out at one another in despair.

Though there had been many amongst them who had truly believed that such a day would never come, the gaze of the Great Devourer had settled upon the galaxy once more. A new wave of tyrannid hive fleets had crept into the Eastern Fringe under the cover of unprecedented human unrest, and with the return of the xenos had come the horrifying realisation that in fact mankind might never truly be rid of them.

And now, Sotha was no more.

Great and noble Sotha. The fortress-monastery at Mount Pharos. All gone – consumed by the foul, living tide of Hive Fleet Kraken.

But, like little more than ghostly shadows of their former selves, the Scythes of the Emperor lived on. They reeled from the death of their home world in a way that few beyond the Adeptus Astartes could ever truly appreciate.

The loss was shameful. It was inexcusable.

It had wounded them more deeply than anything else ever could.

The alert klaxons on the bridge were finally silenced as the *Heart of Cronus* swung into its high anchor approach. The acrid tang of burned-out circuits hung in the stagnant air, the main filtration system having been one of the many lost to the fire, and the deck plates around the command throne were sticky with retardant foam residue. Ragged and scorched crewmen, most still wearing their emergency breath-masks, blearily clung to their duties.

With a tortured grind of gears, the central blast doors slid open to reveal the strobing darkness of the corridors beyond, and Captain Thracian limped through. His proud, transhuman features were marred by an expression of utter defeat.

‘Fleet Master Zebulon is dead,’ he announced, coldly. ‘My brother-captain’s injuries were too severe. There was nothing they could do.’

Thracian’s black-and-gold power armour was scorched, and his cloak hung in tatters behind him. Each laboured stride sent dull pain shooting up his right side. As he passed the empty throne, he spared it only a single reluctant glance.

‘Shipmaster Devanti’s condition is critical, but he lives.’

The news brought a stunned silence to the human crew. It was not unexpected, but the reality of hearing it from a senior Chapter officer took it from a fearful rumour to stark, inescapable fact. Thracian wondered how

many more truths would make that transition in the minutes, hours and days to come, under the circumstances.

He halted before the cracked, static-laced screens of the forward oculus. The left-hand pane was dead. So were the hololithic overlay projectors. ‘Tactical report,’ he called out to no one in particular, tying back the lank strands of his hair. ‘This is not my ship, but I would have a full appraisal of our location and disposition.’

A female serf-lieutenant with a hastily bandaged gash across her forehead stepped forwards, a data-slate in hand. Before the armoured Space Marine, she looked even more fragile and haggard, but her manner was firm.

‘We have arrived at the Miral System, my lord, as per Captain Zebulon’s original order. Seems we gave the local monitor patrols quite a scare – they weren’t expecting us, and our dispersal pattern was... a little sloppy. As a formality, they’re relaying our ident-codes to the Militarum outpost on the second planet now, for verification. We’re updating our horologs to the local mean time, although that loses us something like nine weeks, even after relativity adjustment.’

‘And how many ships made the jump with us?’

‘Information is still sketchy. We estimate no more than twenty-five vessels, based on the faint carrier signal transmissions from beyond the system-edge. About a third of them are apparently drifting without power, or have zero vox-capability after making the translation.’

Thracian furrowed his brow, prickling the superficial burns on the side of his face. ‘Only twenty-five. Less than a quarter of the Chapter fleet.’

The lieutenant nodded wearily, scrolling through the numbers. ‘Aye, lord. We had visual contact with at least another twelve before we entered the warp, but they are presently unaccounted for. It’s possible that...’ She sniffed, wiping dried blood from her top lip. ‘It’s possible that *some* may yet find their way here, but without long-range comms we’ll never know where the rest might end up.’

Glancing up at the crazed oculus, Thracian lowered his voice a little. ‘And what of the xenos hive ships? Could they have followed us?’

‘Highly unlikely, my lord, although we do have reports from the *Dromea Bathos*, the *Pale Rider* and the strike cruiser *Atreides* of continued action against tyrannid boarders.’ The lieutenant paused for a moment, then continued. ‘Forgive my boldness, but Brother-Codicier Spiridonas might

be better able to advise you on the matter of further pursuit.’

‘Aye. Perhaps.’

A few muted cries of alarm went up across the bridge. Out beyond the viewports, two of the stricken Chapter vessels – by their markings, the *Ionia* and the listing, battle-scarred destroyer *Light of the Pharos* – had drifted too close together. Thracian watched as the *Pharos* collided with the other ship, its dorsal ridge tearing a hole in her flank and spilling debris and flash-frozen atmosphere into the void. Other vessels close to the impact began to pull away, their shipmasters wary of being drawn into a cascading wreckage storm.

Cursing, he returned his attention to the fragile-looking lieutenant.

‘What is your name and rank designation?’

She straightened a little, although Thracian noted that she stopped short of actually standing to attention.

‘Hannelore, my lord. Serf-lieutenant, second class.’

‘You know this ship, Lieutenant Hannelore. Take me to the Navigator chambers.’

The undercroft spaces of the *Pale Rider* had become a charnel house. The stench of slaughter was heavy in the air, carrying with it the acidic reek of xenos bio-weapon discharge and other, even less wholesome smells. The ship had suffered badly at the teeth and claws of the invaders, though her crew were exceedingly lucky to be counted among those who had managed to flee the death of Sotha.

It was not clean fighting. It was cramped, and chaotic, and far too many had died, for so little gain. Fatigue dragging at his limbs, Culmonios shook the blood and ragged flesh from the teeth of his chainsword before whirling around to hack into another of the scuttling beasts as it leapt for him.

‘*Brother,*’ came a heaving, breathless voice over the short- range vox, ‘*this is Nimeon. We have them contained. Port side, compartment nine.*’

Culmonios battered the creature down, wrenching the gun-analogue from its forelimbs and ramming it over and over into the thing’s screeching face. His own pistol had long since run dry. There had, simply, been too many of them.

He threw the bio-weapon aside and grabbed the tyranid creature by the

throat. It thrashed and snapped at him, until he broke its spine over his knee.

Hauling himself back to his feet with a wordless cry of exertion, took a splattering hit to the breastplate as he charged the last of their numbers, though the corrosive, organic projectile – whatever it was – did not pierce the ceramite. The pair of skulking creatures hissed at him as he closed the distance, trying to scramble away over the mounds of their dead kin, but Culmonios would not be denied. He slammed bodily into the first, sending it sprawling to the deck where he shattered its chitin-crested skull beneath his armoured heel.

With a bestial shriek the last creature tried to raise its weapon, but Culmonios grabbed its open jaw and sheathed his chainsword in its gullet with one savage thrust. The tyranid twitched as it died, gagging on the razor-sharp teeth of the blade.

*‘Culmonios, are you receiving? Unknown hostiles were reported mass—’*

‘Hunter-slayers,’ he growled. His twin heartbeats thundered in his ears. ‘Forty-plus confirmed kills. This deck is cleansed.’

*‘Deck seventeen cleansed, aye. Heading to your position now. Are the others still with you?’*

‘Negative. They are all gone.’

He ripped the chainsword free, and let the alien corpse crash to the deck. The blade rattled disappointingly, the mechanism evidently fouled by overuse in the past few hours, but Culmonios could only stare down at the steaming bone-case of the tyranid’s fallen weapon.

The damned thing had an *eye*. It stared back at him, the slit-pupil responding reflexively to the erratic flicker of the lumens overhead.

Disgust rose in his gorge. Disgust, and rage, and sorrow.

‘You vile, unworthy abominations,’ he muttered behind his helm visor. ‘How did your misbegotten kind ever take the home world?’

There was something in that vacant, alien gaze. Something that was not merely a weapon, not merely a tool. Culmonios gritted his teeth and, with one thumb, gouged out the eye and crushed it in the palm of his gauntlet.

He came up slowly, his hands trembling. Casting about the compartment, he took in the nightmarish scene that lay all around. A tableau of dead faces and spilled blood. Here and there, the bulky silhouette of a fallen Chapter brother. Spent bolter casings. Arcs of red splattered across the

bulkheads, in some places right up to the vaulted ceiling. The deck plates were slick with gore, the remains of human and xenos alike hopelessly mingled.

It would all have to be disposed of. Ejected into the void, most likely, or scoured with flame. It was an undignified end for those Imperial citizens who had already died such a poor death.

The ventral hull zones were where the fighting had been thickest, but the short-range vox was filled with reports from his surviving battle-brothers and the frigate's serf security teams as they drove the last xenos creatures back to the outer compartments. Culmonios gathered that the fleet – if it could be considered such – had made the jump back to real space, but the translation had not even registered upon his weary senses. For him, the past hours had been filled with naught but slaughter, and the frenzied cries of the alien attackers.

He trudged back to his most prized kill, letting his chainsword clatter to the deck as he went.

The hulking corpse of a full-grown tyranid warrior lay crumpled over a handful of its lesser cousins, its spilled innards cooling, its eyes glassy and black. The beast had claimed three of his battle-brothers before he had struck it down; Gordani's empty helm was still gripped in its claws. Culmonios knelt beside the fallen monstrosity, which in life had stood easily half as tall again as an armoured Space Marine.

'They don't look so big when they're on their backs,' came Brother Nimeon's voice from across the compartment. Culmonios had not heard him forcing his way through the barricaded entrance, though the warrior now picked gingerly through the carnage, sweeping the lamp of his bolter left and right. 'Oh, Holy Terra – this was another one of the refugee holds.'

Culmonios nodded solemnly. The xenos boarding parties seemed to have been drawn to the least-protected parts of the ship, like predators seeking out the weakest members of the herd.

And they had fed well. The Scythes had arrived too late.

Drawing his combat blade, Culmonios wrenched the tyranid's head up and began to saw at the corded sinews of its neck.

'Brother, what are you doing?' asked Nimeon.

Culmonios did not look up. A righteous fury burned in his hearts. 'This was the greatest of them,' he muttered. 'It shall serve as a warning to those

that follow.’

‘I do not think the xenos can be cowed by a gibbet.’

‘Who said anything about a gibbet? This is a trophy.’

With a meaty snap, he twisted the beast’s crested skull free and let the body fall away. As he rose, he hefted the crest like a shield, testing its weight. Bloody ropes of drool still hung from the creature’s slack jaws.

Nimeon removed his helm, repulsion written clearly upon his face, but Culmonios met his gaze unwaveringly.

‘They have taken everything from us, brother, and so shall I take from them as I damn well please.’ He did not bother to clean the blood from his knife, and it slid wetly back into the sheath at his hip. ‘We will have our vengeance upon the Kraken, one foul beast at a time.’

Spiridonas lay amidst the tangled cables of the control blister, his muscular chest heaving. His bare arms and hands were wound up in the psi-conductive mechanism, and a crystalline hood had been forced over his broad skull, though the webbing had evidently torn as a result. His eyes were screwed closed, and had been for a good while.

Brother Machaon knelt beside him, one gauntleted hand upon the Librarian’s shoulder.

‘Who was with him during the voyage?’

The two armoured serfs at his back shuffled warily, their lascarbines clutched in unsteady hands. ‘No one, my lord,’ one of them replied. ‘He ordered us all to leave, after the...’

His words trailed off, and he nodded to the four bodies that lay beneath a bloody tarpaulin beside the entrance hatch.

‘There were rumours, my lord, from when the xenos attacked. Madness. Murder. He said he did not need the distraction of mortal minds nearby.’

Machaon frowned. ‘Someone should have been with him.’

He selected a muscle relaxant dosage from his narthecium, and slid the needle into Spiridonas’ taut forearm. The Librarian sagged a little, though he continued to grind his teeth as he gasped down each laboured breath.

The second human stiffened, and put a finger to the vox-bead in his ear. ‘My lord Apothecary – Captain Thracian is demanding entrance to the Navigator chambers. How should I respond?’

‘Let him in.’

After a few moments, the hatchway mechanism was unlocked and the doors slid open. Thracian, though clearly having been wounded in the evacuation, still managed to carry himself with the prideful gait of a true-blooded Sothan. A young female officer followed in his wake, looking distinctly uncomfortable as the two of them made their way past the covered bodies. Beneath her bloody field dressing, Machaon recognised her as the replacement executive officer appointed by Shipmaster Devanti after the orbital attack.

‘Captain,’ he said with a slight incline of his head, but remaining at Spiridonas’ side. ‘I trust you know of Zebulon’s passing?’

‘I do. I was with him.’

‘My condolences, then. He was a worthy hero of the Chapter.’

Thracian nodded in acknowledgement, coming to stand over Machaon and the insensible Librarian. ‘He looks bad.’

Machaon consulted his medicae auspex. ‘He has not fared well. The exertion has darkened his thoughts.’

‘How so? Is the mind of a Librarian not trained to channel the aether?’

Somewhat surprised by the frankness of the question, and conscious of his patient’s current lack of dignity, Machaon gestured to the serf guards and the lieutenant. ‘Leave us. All of you. Bar and lock the doors. No one is to enter these chambers without my authorisation.’

The first guard looked to Thracian for confirmation, but the captain simply stared back at him, blankly. ‘Yes, my lord Apothecary,’ he mumbled.

*He doesn’t know, Machaon realised. Young Thracian doesn’t yet understand the weight of the duty that may now fall to him.*

Beyond the Navigator chambers, throughout the *Heart of Cronus* and across the scattered fleet, the Scythes of the Emperor and their Chapter thralls were in need of leadership.

And if not Thracian, who else?

Seemingly almost as an afterthought as the serfs made their way out of the chamber, the captain addressed the lieutenant. ‘Hannelore, send shuttles with repair crews to those ships still without communications. We need headcounts on the survivors, and a complete inventory of supplies. Anything and everything that the shipmasters managed to bring aboard their vessels before the jump.’

‘Yes, Captain Thracian,’ she replied.

*No salute*, Machaon noted as she left. When they were alone and the hatchway was sealed once more, he turned his attentions back to Spiridonas.

‘You ask if a Librarian should not be more than capable of navigating a ship through the warp, brother-captain. Yes, it is quite possible – though not bred for it like the houses of the Navis Nobilite, a trained battle-psyker might use his sight to give a vague heading, once his vessel was under way.’ He delicately ran two fingers of his gauntlet over the torn webbing of Spiridonas’ hood. ‘In truth, I doubt any *but* a member of the Librarius could have brought us here from Sotha.’

Thracian’s eyes followed the psi-conductor cabling up to the ports in the ceiling, then back to Spiridonas. ‘How so?’

Grimly, Machaon pointed to the bloody tarpaulin by the door.

‘The xenos are insidious foes, my lord. The mere presence of their hive fleets shrouds our psykers’ connection to the warp, and conjures terrors in the minds of those who would gaze into the abyss regardless. From what I have seen so far, the beasts of the Kraken cast a shadow far greater and far darker than any previously encountered by the Imperium. A Space Marine’s mind is more resistant to it, but by no means immune.’

Narrowing those golden eyes of his, Thracian grunted in understanding. ‘I see the truth of it. This is how they crippled our fleet, then – we had not the sight of our Navigators to guide us away, nor the minds of our astropaths to call for help.’

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The only sounds in the chamber were the crackle of dead systems, and the Librarian’s laboured breathing.

At length, Machaon rose. ‘Captain, I sense an unasked question in your silence. Why did you come here?’

When he replied, Thracian spoke quietly, though Machaon was unsure who exactly he thought might overhear them. ‘I would speak to Spiridonas,’ he said. ‘My question is for him.’

‘A wasted journey then, my lord. I do not believe he even knows we are here. I do not care to imagine what alien nightmares he might have glimpsed, to bring him to this state.’

Carefully, Thracian drew his tattered cloak aside and crouched before the

control blister, his armour growling in protest and the movement clearly paining his injuries. Machaon's trained eye spotted heavy machine scraping in the ceramite, as well as buckling to several of the joints – the captain had evidently been crushed by something during the course of the evacuation. He was doing well, considering.

Thracian removed his gauntlets and leaned in towards the Librarian.

'Brother Spiridonas, can you hear me?'

There was no response. He glanced back at Machaon. The Apothecary shrugged.

'Brother Spiridonas,' Thracian said again, raising his voice. 'Have we escaped them? Will the tyranids follow us here?'

Machaon saw him place a hand upon the Codicier's straining arm. Spiridonas' eyes snapped open at the contact.

The Librarian screamed.

It was a sound of indescribable, maddened panic.

In an anonymous cargo hold, aboard a silently drifting frigate out beyond the edge of the Miral System, a lone Chapter brother stumbled out from between two grubby transit containers, and fell to his knees upon the deck.

His bare hands trembled. The enormity, the horror of it all, had shaken him to the core.

There was blood. His forearms were spattered with it. He dropped his broken falx blade and laughed, tears stinging his eyes.

*I had to be sure*, he convinced himself.

He ran his hands over his scalp, leaving sticky red smears behind.

His name was Brother Hadrios. For now, that was the only truth that he was willing to believe. His desperate laughter echoed again in the gloomy hold.

They would be coming for him soon. He had to move quickly.



# CHAPTER TWO

## MASTER OF THE FLEET

Nyall Devanti was an officer who had more than proved his worth, over five decades of front-line duty. The shipmaster's heritage was dubious at best – he had been taken from his mother, a penal colony inmate, at birth and raised as a ward of the Chapter – but he was marked as a fierce commander and an uncompromising tactician. His service records, which Thracian had studied only hours before, suggested that he had overcome a performance-related stim addiction in his late sixties in order to qualify for juvenat treatments.

Quite aside from being unwilling to cede his post to younger candidates, he had apparently been a vain man indeed.

That was a bitter irony, now.

From his medicae cot, attended by sterile-scrubbed adepts and surgeons, he had requested – nay, insisted, demanded – that his masters bring their conference to his bedside, rather than exclude him on the basis of infirmity. He had refused to be relieved of command of the *Heart of Cronus*, even as the weary medicae staff had struggled to save what they could of his flesh.

With an awkward-looking deck officer holding a wad of gauze to his lips, Devanti was wracked by another bout of coughing. His own hands,

bundled thick with counterseptic gel and surgical wrappings, pawed feebly at the air as he choked and gagged.

The gauze came away smeared with bloody phlegm, and two medicae adepts tried to lower him back down onto the stained bolsters.

‘Get away from me,’ he croaked from behind the regenerative plastek mask, shoving them away with surprising strength. ‘I’m not some feeble... old...’

The words devolved into more coughing. An attendant surgeon looked up from his charts.

‘The burns to his face, arms and upper body were obviously quite severe,’ he explained, ‘but the flames seared his lungs very badly, too. We need to drain the fluid again, or there is a greater risk of infection, not to mention long-term respiratory complications. We simply do not have the facilities here for anything more elegant.’

Cursing floridly, Devanti tugged an intravenous line from his wrist and hurled it back in the face of one of the adepts. From the surgeon’s expression, Thracian guessed that this was not the first time that the shipmaster had done it.

‘He is... a *difficult* patient. He won’t stop giving orders, even from his bed. I would therefore ask that you keep this brief, brother-captain.’

Thracian grunted. He had no desire to drag the matter out.

Sipping water from a proffered tube canister, Devanti watched the surgeon leave the chamber, and then took a few moments to ease himself into a more comfortable position. From behind the mask, his red-rimmed eyes took in the five Space Marines gathered at the foot of his cot.

‘My lords,’ he said, grinning crookedly. ‘Forgive me. I am out of uniform.’ He prodded the deck officer beside him with a bandaged hand. ‘But my aides tell me we’ve reached Miral. I will have the commanders of the other vessels form up and begin—’

‘Be still, shipmaster,’ said Thracian, gently silencing him. ‘It is already begun – we are at high anchor over Miral Prime, and have established communication with the Astra Militarum commanders at the secondary outpost. Your lieutenant has been most helpful in your absence.’

Devanti balked. ‘She is young. Too young to be in command of the Chapter fleet.’

Thracian gazed levelly back. ‘She is *not* in command of the fleet. Not

yet.'

An uneasy moment passed. The younger deck officer stared at his own boots, and at length Devanti nodded.

'Aye, my lord. Of course. Forgive me.'

'There is nothing to forgive. You carry a great pain, and not merely from the wounds you have suffered in the execution of your noble duties. It is not within the medicae's power to cure our shared grief for the loss of the home world, but I must insist that you remain here and let them repair your body, at least.'

Devanti sagged, his gaze falling to his wrapped hands. 'But I am the master of this ship,' he muttered.

'And we in turn are *your* masters,' Thracian replied. 'You will do as you are bidden.'

Sergeants Kalos and Angeloi of Fourth Company stood with him, along with Romonos from Thracian's own Third, and the grizzled old Scout veteran Brimelow. Aside from a dozen or so designated squad leaders still engaged in security sweeps on other ships throughout the fleet, it was a grim sign that the surviving Chapter officers could be counted on the digits of one hand.

Sergeants. Campaign veterans. The Librarius. So many had fallen.

Across the system, as each new report had come in, the Scythes of the Emperor had been diminished. Brother- Captain Argus was confirmed dead at Sotha, swallowed up along with the majority of his company on the Tegean wetlands. Nikanor and Dall, both of whom had tried and failed to break the xenos advance on Mount Pharos beside High Chaplain Iphidamas, were missing. The last anyone had heard, Synes had taken seven full squads to re-secure the Odessan landing fields, though survivors from Sixth Company claimed to have been in contact with him for some hours after the enemy hordes overran the transit terminals. Levidis, captain of the Tenth, had brought his small neophyte contingent down from their training camps in the Blackrock Mountains to cover the civilian evacuation, but no mention was made of him having boarded any escape craft himself.

With the death of Zebulon, Thracian was the highest ranked officer left in the fleet.

'Two hundred and thirty-nine,' he said, looking to each of the assembled

sergeants in turn. ‘By our best estimate, only two hundred and thirty-nine battle-brothers left Sotha alive, and many of them are seriously wounded.’

Romonos twitched. ‘From almost six companies’ worth? Surely that cannot be true, my lord. There are other shipmasters yet to report in, or more vessels that will rejoin us later...’

Shifting his weight from his injured side, Thracian shrugged.

‘It is difficult to say for certain, though I have little hope on that count. The master of navigation believes that any ships lost during the guided jump will have drifted *significantly* off-course or, even worse, fallen back into the jaws of the Kraken. Given the distance we travelled to escape the shadow of the hive fleets, without Brother Spiridonas we simply would not have been able to move our vessels as one through the warp at all, no matter how accurate the transit calculations. Zebulon’s gambit was risky, but without our Navigators we were blind.’

Devanti hunched forwards. ‘Then command of the fleet is yours, my lord Thracian, until Captain Zebulon’s replacement can be appointed. I’ll assign you a liaison, once I’m back on my feet.’

‘Do not trouble yourself, shipmaster,’ Thracian replied, dourly. ‘I do not intend to hold the position long. Chapter Master Thorcyra will find a more suitable candidate, when he returns.’

‘You have news?’ Romonos asked. ‘Has there been word from the Chapter Master’s expedition force?’

‘There has not. We have received nothing from them since long before the general recall to Sotha was issued, nor any acknowledgement of it afterwards.’

Sergeant Brimelow wrinkled his nose, his neatly trimmed but greying beard accentuating the expression. Clad in light carapace plate and reconnaissance fatigues, he appeared more slender than the others, but his demeanour and words always seemed to carry the weight of experience.

‘I’ll not believe them lost. Never a more stubborn pair of captains could the Chapter Master wish by his side than Agaitas and the consul. Let the rest of the galaxy fall beneath the shadow of the Kraken, and the three of them would survive just to prove that it could be done. Have no fear on that count.’

Devanti bowed his head and, in spite of his injuries, saluted in the old Sothan manner, and the five Space Marines shared a moment of fond

remembrance for their absent brothers.

Thracian smiled, though it felt hollow even to him.

‘I pray you are right, brother-sergeant. If Master Thorcyra and the First and Second Companies are lost too, then I see little hope for the future of our Chapter.’

Kalos, ever the realist, spoke up. ‘The muster was far from complete when the tyranids struck. How many of our brethren still make all haste for Sotha, unaware that it has fallen?’

‘There is no way to know,’ Thracian replied. ‘All we can do is try to re-establish communication with as many of them as possible, now that we have the use of the Militarum outpost and their astropaths. We are sending the usual Chapter signifiers, and marking Miral as the rallying point. Once Master Thorcyra returns, he will find us ready and prepared to strike back at the xenos.’

Angeloi nodded enthusiastically. ‘Yes, brothers – vengeance. Righteous vengeance for the destruction of our home world!’

‘Aye. We will have vengeance.’

When Thracian uttered it, he found the word pleasing to the ear and the soul alike. He felt the heat of it – the surety, the certitude – as it smothered his grief and gifted him with purpose. Amidst all of the horror, the Scythes of the Emperor could cling to the irrefutable fact that their enemies would pay the ultimate price for daring to set even one clawed foot upon the wholesome soil of Sotha.

*We will be ready,* he thought. *When the time comes, we will be ready.*

Kalos, however, did not seem to share in his conviction.

‘Might I ask, brother-captain, why it was that my lord Zebulon brought us to the Miral System over any other? Is it so far from Sotha that we will be free of pursuit until we can make war again on our own terms?’

The question brought Thracian up short. In that instant, he remembered Spiridonas.

‘The bastion at the Giant’s Coffin, most likely,’ he replied as quickly as he could. ‘It is small, but well provisioned. A single keep, perimeter defences, some existing landing and cargo facilities. I don’t think it was ever intended to be much more than an outpost for the Chapter, though. It will be in a bit of a state, but Sergeant Brimelow has already made contact with his company brethren on the surface – they were running recruitment

and training operations here for the last nine cycles, before the recall.’

The Scout veteran nodded. ‘Sixty-eight aspirants, pre-conditioned. Death world stock. Tough little runts, by all accounts. It will take a while to get them anything like combat-ready, but we should step up recruitment immediately on all our tributary worlds, if only to replace the losses from Sotha.’ He drew a tablet and stylus from his belt pack, running down a short list. ‘By your leave, I’ll take anyone with extended campaign experience down to the surface to speed up the selection process, and an Apothecary to begin final screening.’

Before Thracian could voice his approval, Devanti looked up at him from the medicae cot. ‘Pardon my ignorance, lord – but the “Giant’s Coffin”? Is that a local settlement?’

It was Kalos who answered.

‘The Giant’s Coffin is the largest mesa rising above the jungle canopy in the equatorial region. Its height makes it a natural fortification. The mesas are practically the only landmarks, since the local tribes are semi-migratory. No settlements to speak of, although—’

Klaxons sounded, echoing throughout the ship. Medicae adepts scattered to their alert condition posts, and Devanti’s surgeon reappeared at his bedside.

Almost reflexively, Thracian’s hand went to his vox-link. ‘Bridge, this is Thracian. Report.’

He was answered by Lieutenant Hannelore.

*‘Brother-captain, we have a new sensor contact approaching from the system edge. It’s on an intercept course for the fleet anchorage. Weapons range in nineteen minutes.’*

Devanti spluttered, trying to rise. Whatever he was trying to say was lost in a renewed bout of fluid-choked coughing. ‘Get... get the... *intercept...*’

Thracian ignored him. Was this new contact a thin ray of hope, or the precursor to some new battle that they could not possibly hope to win? ‘Lieutenant – confirm threat level. Is it one of ours?’ he asked.

The link was silent for what felt like an eternity. All the while, the alert klaxons continued their cyclical drone.

*‘Confirmed, captain. It’s a Chapter vessel.’*

Forgetting his station and the pain in his side, Thracian laughed out loud and slammed his gauntlets together in relief as the klaxons died.

‘Yes! Identify. Run full authentication before standing down.’

While Devanti’s aide and the protesting surgeon tried to ease him back into his bed, the Space Marines anxiously waited on Hannelore’s response.

*‘It’s the Nova Prospectum, brother-captain. They have Forge Master Sebastion and his cadre on board.’*

The new arrival was duly screened by the fleet pickets, and Romonos led a boarding party to secure the ship. What they found there was surprising, under the circumstances.

Far from just another battle-damaged blockade runner, the small cruiser’s systems had been repaired by Sebastion’s Techmarines whilst in transit – void shields, communications and both long- and short-range sensors were fully functional, which was more than could be said for most of the other Chapter vessels that had escaped Sotha. The crew was a veteran outfit, with many commendations among them from the last decade or so.

Though she still bore the wounds of her recent brawls with the xenos upon her hull, the *Nova Prospectum* was already prepared for active service once more.

Thracian glanced over the report in Zebulon’s old chambers. As he had paced the bridge, the weight of a long, slow exhaustion had crept over him. A transhuman body might endure any hardship, physical or mental, but the Scythes of the Emperor had suffered much and, without an immediate foe, a curious post-adrenal edginess had begun to fray his concentration. He had found that he could no longer recall the last time he had taken water, nor food, and certainly not the last time that he had allowed himself any measure of catalepsean half-sleep.

And so, begrudgingly, he had withdrawn from his new command to rest and meditate awhile in the late Master of the Fleet’s staterooms. The armourer-serfs had attended him, there. So too had the Apothecaries.

He had been almost reluctant to look upon the flesh beneath his battered war-plate. His body had run fever-hot as it worked to repair the crush damage, but the outward signs of his injuries had been thankfully minimal. Now, cleansed and anointed with unscented oil, he stood in a simple robe embroidered with the Chapter’s twin-scythe emblem, a data-slate in his hand.

With a faint whirr, the lenses of Sebastion’s ocular array adjusted their

focus. ‘The craftsmanship is exquisite,’ he said, flatly.

Thracian looked up, then followed the forge master’s gaze to the mosaic murals behind him. They covered the larger part of three fascia walls in the chamber: bright, colourful ceramics bathed in the light of soft lumens. For the most part, the murals showed triumphant scenes from the Chapter’s long history, but the most grandiose was undoubtedly the depiction of Mount Pharos itself. Rendered in the classical style, it shone with a metaphorical halo, casting its radiance out to all the other worlds of the Sotharan League. Beneath it, traced in the polished black stone of the mountain itself, was the simple legend ‘*LUX IN TENEBRIS*’.

Long had noble Sotha been a light in the darkness, but no more.

‘Aye,’ Thracian replied. ‘I would never have picked Brother-Captain Zebulon to possess such rare talent. Or perhaps we simply underestimate just how long he spent on his own in here, over the years...’

No smile cracked Sebastion’s inscrutable features. From where he sat at the grand conference table, he gestured to Thracian’s data-slate.

‘You have read your sergeant’s report?’

‘I have. I cannot fully express just how thankful I am, forge master, that you found your way here. It gives me hope that more of our lost brethren may yet follow.’

‘Indeed,’ Sebastion nodded. ‘Although, we were only minutes behind you at the point of entry, readying our warp engines. We had the same transit calculations and – to speak plainly – the best coterie of technical minds gathered in one place, and *still* we ended up more than two systems away from Miral.’ He placed his palms flat on the table, the symmetry between his hands square and perfect. ‘The empyrean is not to be entered lightly. Without a Navigator, it would normally be suicide to attempt anything longer than a system-to-system hop.’

He was right, and Thracian knew it. It was a miracle that they had made it this far, into relative safety over one of their tributary worlds, but here they would be forced to remain until...

Well, until what? Until the xenos threat had passed, or was dealt with by another agency of the Imperium? Until Chapter Master Thorcyra could return and punish these disgraced and unworthy Scythes who had let the Chapter’s noble home world fall, sacrificing millions of mortal lives just to buy themselves enough time to flee into the shadows? Until,

unmolested for some twenty or thirty years, they might replenish their company ranks with up-armoured savages from the world below, waiting for new Navigators and astropaths to be shipped out at the Militarum commanders' transmitted request?

Thracian trudged slowly to the chamber's armoured viewports. Beyond the scorched glass, he regarded the great sweep of Miral Prime's horizon stretching away into the void's night, and saw the first of Brimelow's drop-ships breaking from the fleet to begin planetfall. The pain in his side had been reduced to a dull throb, but the emptiness in his hearts was as great as ever. He caught sight of his own reflection in the port, and looked away.

'I remain hopeful, forge master,' he murmured. 'Hopeful that the Scythes of the Emperor are not already a spent force in this new war.'

He turned back to face Sebastion, forcing himself to resolution.

'We will continue to send our astrotelepathic summons, and we will draw all our surviving battle-brothers here to await the return of Master Thorcyra. Under his command, we might yet teach the tyranid race a thing or two about cold, righteous Sothan fury, if they have it within their feeble minds to comprehend such a thing.'

Sebastion nodded, and rose from his seat. 'Just so. Direct me then, Captain Thracian. My Techmarine cadre is at your disposal.'

Thracian drew up at the forge master's side, and swept a hand over the table's polished surface. A hololithic projection of the Miral System leapt into being over it, with the fleet's disposition marked with myriad runes and sigils denoting each ship's current status.

'The work you carried out on board the *Nova Prospectum* was exemplary. I need your adepts to extend the same to the most heavily damaged vessels at anchor – these six in particular. Divide them into four teams of three. Liaise with the Adeptus Mechanicus engineers wherever you can. They are few, but they know our ships well.'

With a series of keystrokes on his data-slate, he inloaded the forge master's own ship inventory to the hololith.

'The munitions and technical supplies you brought up from Mount Pharos should be split between the bastion at Giant's Coffin, and our magazines and workshops here on the *Heart*. Thirty-seventy. Have our serfs ship the Predators, the Razorbacks and the Rhinos down to the surface too.'

Sebastion blink-clicked his ocular array, capturing the lists for later reference. ‘Do you have the capacity to transport them directly? Drop-ships, or bulk-landers perhaps?’

‘Brother, we have aerial transports enough,’ Thracian replied. ‘It is armour and ordnance that we are lacking. We were forced to abandon so much before we departed – there simply wasn’t enough time to throw the civilians out of the cargo holds, to make room.’ He sighed, thinking back to those last, desperate hours. ‘We even had to leave the Venerable Ancients behind, to cover our escape.’

‘I understand. It all happened so quickly, did it not.’

The forge master’s words hung in the air for a while, as Thracian continued to scroll through the materiel inventory, marking specific items of interest. If Sebastion had anything more on his mind, he left it unsaid for the time being.

‘With your adepts so tasked,’ Thracian said, finally, ‘I would charge you with a more solemn duty, in my stead. Forgive the formality, but it will require an oath to be spoken before you leave.’

Sebastion looked at him, narrowing his one organic eye slightly.

‘Name it, brother.’

From the folds of his robe, Thracian produced an encrypted data-wand and held it out before him. Cautious of being overheard, he spoke more softly.

‘Though I hold Zebulon’s command of the fleet in trust, I am still Master of the Arsenal by rights,’ he said. ‘I hold the keys and cipher-codes to a score of Chapter weapons caches across Sothara, but were I to leave now then my absence would surely be noted. I need you to requisition a single astropath from the Militarum outpost, along with a dozen cargo servitors – you will take the *Nova Prospectum* and plot a series of short-range warp jumps through these marked systems.’

Nodding slowly, Sebastion took the wand. Thracian continued.

‘Approach each of the locations carefully, and deactivate the auto-defences. Leave nothing behind. Tell no one, not even the crew of your vessel, of the true purpose of your search. Whether we need it or not, I would not have such devices left unguarded as a second Tyrannic War threatens to engulf the segmentum.’

‘Of course, brother-captain. I will deliver it all back to you, here, and

none shall learn of it who do not need to.'

Satisfied that the forge master understood the gravity of his request, Thracian deactivated the hololith and went to pour himself a goblet of water. Soon, he was sure, his appetite would return.

Sebastion stood silently, watching him.

'Was there something else, forge master?' Thracian asked, raising the goblet to his parched lips.

'There is. If you don't mind me asking, brother – what do you plan to do with the civilian refugees from Sotha?'

Thracian let his gaze drop to the polished floor of the chamber. He took another cold sip of water.

'In our darkest hour, it seems that we traded our Chapter's strength for their deliverance. Those who wish to remain must earn their keep. They belong to us now, as surely as any serf or bonded retainer, and their lives must be spent in service to the Scythes of the Emperor.'

Sebastion folded his arms across his chest. 'Those who wish to remain. What of those who *do not* wish to remain, under such a condition?'

Setting down the empty goblet, Thracian looked back at the resplendent mural of Mount Pharos. He remembered the cultural freedoms that the common people of Sotha had enjoyed for thousands of years, even when there were those in the Imperium who openly decried such reckless, wanton liberty.

And he realised that he had no answer to Sebastion's question.



# CHAPTER THREE

## HONOUR'S MIGHT

In the pale dawn light, the mists rising from the jungle gave the place an eerie, spectral quality. The cries of predatory birds echoed up from the canopy, though no movement stirred the leaves for as far as Culmonios could see.

Given his genhanced vision, that was a long way indeed.

He took a deep breath of the strangely scented air. The jungle was like a great ocean that lay calm and flat, spreading all the way to the horizon with only a handful of rocky mesas standing as islands amidst the green. At the most elevated point of the Giant's Coffin, the promontory's sides were almost sheer cliffs, dropping away to scree slopes that plunged down towards the treeline, while the plateaued top was a more gradual climb crowned by the bastion's somewhat dilapidated keep and perimeter walls. From there, Culmonios and his companions looked out over the otherwise seemingly featureless expanse of the death world of Miral Prime.

'It smells foul,' he muttered, and spat upon the rocks at his feet. Several of his brother-veterans chuckled.

Nimeon looked at him, his boltgun slung over one shoulder. 'That's the primal jungle, brother. It smells of trees, and moss, and beasts, and orchids, and rotting leaf mulch. As one would expect.'

Scowling, Culmonios covered his nose with the back of his gauntlet. ‘And feculence, and sweat. It stinks of unwashed bodies. I can smell those trog-savages from here.’

Back at the outer line gates beyond the bastion walls, the first group of Mirali aspirants stood in loose ranks under the eyes of the Chapter’s training sergeants. They were a motley bunch of youths, clad in rags and scale-hide, and daubed with white tribal markings. Some wore their hair in loose topknots, while others appeared to have recently been shaved, presumably by the same serf-menials who had confiscated their slings and spears in preparation for an official accounting. An Apothecary, accompanied by two medicae adepts, made his way from youth to youth, taking measure of their height, weight and muscle tone.

‘Have a care, Culmonios,’ said Nimeon. ‘You mock their appearances, yet you do not look so noble yourself, of late.’

Culmonios rounded on him, the sudden movement rattling the xenos bones hanging from his pauldrons. Though he had not brought the improvised skull-crest shield out with him, he knew that, beneath his-gauntlets, his hands were still stained red from its flensing – an act that had already earned him the reprimand of his superiors.

‘Call me a savage, you hive world *bastard*,’ he growled, ‘and I’ll cut your throat.’

The venom in his words evidently took his battle-brothers by surprise; especially Nimeon, who took half a step back. For a few tense moments, the two of them sized one another up as the rising sun bathed the mesa in its reddish glow.

Then Culmonios blinked, checking his bitter fury. He forced his twin hearts to slow, and felt the swell of hyperadrenaline as he quelled his reflexive combat response.

‘Forgive me, brother. I am not myself.’

Nimeon moved slowly towards him, warily extending a hand. ‘Well, whoever you were just then, I don’t like him.’ His face flickered with a hint of a reconciliatory smile. ‘Perhaps we can leave him behind when we depart this world again?’

Feeling vaguely foolish, Culmonios took his brother’s forearm in a warrior-handshake.

‘Aye. Maybe.’

Behind them, the emplaced interceptor cannons cycled up, their ammunition feeds clunking noisily as the heavy mounts began to turn. The Space Marines were in the shadow of the third of nine such batteries, this one positioned to command the eastern facing of the promontory. The guns would be running automated programs, tracking the unseen approach of another drop-ship from orbit.

‘That’s nine more, in the last six hours,’ Brother Keltru muttered. ‘It’s like they’re emptying the fleet.’

Nimeon laughed. ‘Quite the opposite, brothers – they’re filling it. From what the adjutants told me, we’re being sent out in pairs to meet with the local clans. The recruits stationed here at the Coffin are just those who have begun their formal induction, but there are many more that have already been branded by the training sergeants for future cycles.’ He gestured to the gates. ‘Like Culmonios’ new friends over there, for example. Captain Thracian has ordered a full recruitment operation, to begin replacing our losses.’

‘So we’re going to be sharing our barrack-space with trogs, and not just in the short term.’ Culmonios sneered at the thought. ‘Who put Thracian in charge, anyway? Our orders came from Old Man Brimelow in the Tenth, not Thracian. I just want to be clear who it is I’m supposed to voice my objections to, when we get back up to the carriers.’

Nimeon raised a hand again. ‘Captain Thracian is... adjusting to his new role. I understand that he is taking counsel from the remaining officers, on account of his relative inexperience at cross-company command.’ He nodded to Keltru. ‘Your Sergeant Angeloi is amongst them, and Kalos too, so our worthy Fourth Company is well represented. It seems that we are to be the future of the Chapter, brothers. Angeloi is easily the most experienced – I’m sure he will be appointed to replace good Captain Zebulon in command of the fleet, once the Chapter Master returns.’

‘And what if Thorcyra doesn’t return?’ Culmonios muttered. ‘Where does that leave the Chapter’s future?’

Wordlessly, they followed the interceptor cannons’ bearing, catching sight of a Stormraven gunship and her smaller escorts as they broke through the thin cloud cover. The three craft banked low overhead, circling to approach the bastion’s landing pad. As they watched, Culmonios considered his five battle-brothers, and then those from the other

companies who were already preparing to move out into the jungle.

His brow furrowed.

‘Wait. We’re being sent out in pairs? Blindly?’

Nimeon and the others turned to him. He pointed out into the wilderness.

‘How are we supposed to find these trog clans, beyond those that live in the vicinity of the Giant’s Coffin itself? Our auspex isn’t managing to distinguish the natives from all the other life form readings. None of us has ever set foot on Miral Prime before, and there are virtually no geographical landmarks mapped to our cartography indices. It is classified as a death world, and with good reason, from what I’ve read – great tree serpents, land sharks and territorial herbivores bigger than the largest phantines. We’ll be constantly on the defensive, and every battle-brother we lose to the jungle is a poor trade for a handful of *potential* neophytes.’

No one spoke for a moment. Nimeon pursed his lips.

‘That is an excellent point,’ he murmured.

The six of them picked their way around the mesa’s outlying defences, making for the bastion gates on the lower slope. Culmonios stared hard at the feral aspirants as he approached their group, cowing any who would meet his fierce gaze. Until the day came that one of them might prove himself worthy to bear the Chapter’s full heraldry in open battle, he would not even consider them worthy of his limited respect.

Sergeant Brimelow, in his Scout carapace and camo-cloak, trudged up the incline to hail the Space Marines. Not being of Sothan blood, he met them with the sign of the aquila rather than the reaper’s salute.

‘Brothers, you’re going to be doing us a great service. Report to the bastion armoury – the serfs have established a quartermaster’s office for field provisions while you are away from the Coffin.’

Nimeon nodded, deferentially. *Always so calm*, Culmonios brooded, still clenching his fists at the thought of their earlier altercation.

‘Of course, brother-sergeant,’ Nimeon replied. ‘But we have a concern over the specifics of our mission.’

‘Speak it.’

‘Very well, then I shall be frank – we do not know the local terrain, and we are unfamiliar with the ways of the clans. They are apparently adept at remaining hidden when it suits them to do so. How are we to find and bring back the marked recruits without suffering losses along the way?’

Are our numbers not ravaged enough by the Kraken that we must let the jungle take a bite out of us, too?’

Brimelow looked agitated. He rubbed at his beard with a leather-gloved hand.

‘Afraid to get your boots dirty, brother? It’s not like we’re sending you out there alone. This is essentially a potential-combat courier mission.’

Culmonios sagged. He realised what was coming.

‘Pair up,’ Brimelow ordered. ‘Each of you will be assigned a local guide from the existing aspirants. These lads *do* know the local terrain, and I’m sure they’ll keep you safe out there.’ He caught Keltru’s dismayed look, and scoffed. ‘The original idea was to have our veterans show them a thing or two about how the Chapter operates, and to help whittle their numbers down some more. As it is, it looks like they’re going to be teaching you how to hunt a clawgibbon before the day is out.’

Though it was not communicated to Thracian at the time, the renewed summons sent by the astropaths on Miral II had been far from a hopeless vanity.

At his instruction, the Astra Militarum outpost had first begun to transmit the message, just as he had dictated it to his serf attendants. It had been recorded and encrypted, and relayed by trusted couriers under the Chapter’s seal, so that no outsider could interfere. Beyond several nonsensical linguistic dead-ends, the principal content was conveyed in symbolism that would be clear enough to any battle-brother, initiate or thrall of the Scythes of the Emperor.

*Sons of Sotha, the mountain has fallen. Do not follow the light. All forces rendezvous at the Giant’s Coffin, to await the warden’s return. The Kraken shall reap the whirlwind.*

In the interests of maintaining what little human morale remained, he had taken great pains to avoid any notable similarity to the general recall that had brought them all back to Sotha only a few weeks earlier. He had also tried to avoid inadvertently drawing the attention of others who might scent weakness in the bloodied Chapter, like circling carrion-shrikes following a wounded quarian of the herds; under the circumstances, he recognised that the tyranids were not the only foe that could seek to deliver them a killing blow. But after many days of restless anxiety, and

once Sebastian had departed on his clandestine mission to the hidden caches, Thracian began to find that he simply did not have the time to personally request updates from the Militarum commanders, especially since there never were any updates to speak of. Other issues intruded upon his attention, all of the myriad duties and responsibilities that came with the unsought command of a fleet crewed by tense, weary men and women who had lost everything that their masters once held dear.

Then, from out of the eerie silence of the void, from beneath the chilling nightmare-shadow cast by the xenos across whole sectors of the Eastern Fringe, there had come a return transmission.

No. More than that. In hindsight, it was a direct reply.

Thracian would come to wonder, in the months and years that followed, if events might have unfolded differently had news of this been relayed to him straight away. If he had known what was yet to come, would he have stepped up the immediate consolidation of the Chapter and marked a new rendezvous point? With more confidence and decisiveness in those early days, could they have been spared so much more misery afterwards?

As it was, he was lost between procurement requests, security sweeps and repair orders. Since the evacuation from Sotha, his world had grown smaller and smaller with each passing week. The graveness of their situation aside, he questioned whether such matters were even a worthy use of a Space Marine captain's time – it was, therefore, little wonder that Thracian's thoughts had been so preoccupied of late.

Moreover, the relevance of the return transmission had been somewhat misinterpreted by the outpost's astropaths. It was received, documented and filed for later review without a second glance, along with every other half-heard psychic echo buzzing out from the encroaching alien presence.

*'The mountain has fallen,'* the message seemed to repeat. *'Await the warden's return.'*

Accordingly, it should have come as far less of a surprise when the *Honour's Might* – great battle-barge and flagship of the Scythes of the Emperor – forewent the usual protocols and translated directly into the heart of the Miral System. Her immaterial bow wave scattered the fleet's patrol vessels, though they recognised her colours and livery in an instant.

She was Chapter Master Thorcyra's command. After countless months without any direct contact, the Warden of the Pharos had indeed returned.

The Thunderhawk glided through the atmospheric shielding, overtaxed engines cycling down as the pilots manoeuvred onto the embarkation deck using only secondary navigational thrusters. Between the docked hulls of the various craft that had evacuated from Sotha, the gunship bore the ebony and gold of First Company, though its proud lines were similarly streaked and scored with extensive battle damage. Thracian guessed that the expedition to the Sotharan League's troubled north had not been without its own particular tragedies.

Romonos and Angeloi headed up the decidedly ragged welcoming committee at his back. Where but only a short time ago the return of their Chapter Master would have filled each and every one of the Scythes with fierce, martial pride, now they were stung with bitterness and grief, which they wore as openly as their hastily polished battleplate.

Captain Thracian had considered this moment for weeks, playing it out in his mind, over and over in the depths of so many sleepless nights. Even so, he still could not find the words that he would now need to formally break the news to Thorcyra. Before their glorious, heroic master, he would be forced to confess that he and his brothers had abandoned the home world to the xenos, and in that instant he would also be forced to accept it as truth for himself. Sotha was gone, and the honour of the Chapter along with it.

It was also quite clear that Mansirius Thorcyra had not returned to them in triumph, either. The pennants atop the high towers of the *Honour's Might* flew at half-mast in the cold void, and she bore many scars upon her noble hull plating. She was like a seasoned beast of war next to her sister vessel, the *Heart of Cronus*, and yet her shipmaster, Mardelech, had informed the fleet that a boarding delegation would be sent out, rather than another led by Thracian be received in the grand halls of the flagship.

The forward ramp of the Thunderhawk ratcheted open on failing pneumatics, clanging down like the toll of a funeral bell. Armoured boots descended: seventeen— no, eighteen decorated veterans bearing ornate golden power-scythes filing out onto the deck of the *Heart*. Their demeanour was cold and distant, their eyes stern and silently accusing as they faced their humbled brethren.

And behind them, long grey tresses bound up in the traditional style of mourning and with his exquisitely embroidered cloak trailing on the floor,

came the Chapter Master himself.

The great hangar was almost oppressively silent, save for the final cooling creaks of the gunship's engines and the footfalls of the approaching honour guard. Every battle-brother, serf and retainer stood stiffly at attention as the last surviving officer from the fall of Sotha prepared to give account.

Thracian felt himself falter. He could not do it.

*Holy Terra, let this task go to any other...*

Without ceremony or fanfare, Master Thorcyra drew up before Thracian and his warriors. He cast solemnly about the group.

'It is true, then?' he asked. His voice was plaintive, carrying little of the stern authority that Thracian remembered.

No. He could not meet the Chapter Master's gaze.

From somewhere amongst the assembled mortal crew he heard a woman sobbing, and his voice cracked before he could even speak. He swallowed hard.

'It is,' he managed to mumble.

At the sound of those two words, one of the honour guard veterans stumbled, falling to his knees and letting out a most undignified wail of sorrow. Tearful mortal retainers surged forwards, urging the Space Marine up and heaving his scythe back into a trembling grip, then kissing their fingers and touching upon his oath seals and the aquila of his blazon. Other serfs began to weep openly at the sight, the flimsy denial that had kept them at their posts all this time now shattered.

Thracian felt tears stinging his own eyes, though he finally managed to look up at the waiting Chapter Master. He would tell of Zebulon's worthy sacrifice, and Levidis, and Synes, and—

Thorcyra stepped forwards, and embraced him.

'You did it, brother,' the Chapter Master whispered, his sincerity clear. 'My heart is broken by the loss of our home world, but you escaped the massacre that claimed so many others, and I am so very thankful for that. While even just a handful of us remain, there is still hope for the Scythes of the Emperor.'

Around them, Angeloi and Romonos' warriors greeted their returned brethren in shared sorrow, one after another. The attendant human crews soon followed suit. To Thracian, it had all the grim formality of a

memorial wake.

He took Thorcyra's gauntlet in both hands. 'My lord, I feared the worst. We have heard nothing from you in many months. We did not even know if your expedition to the Saphir Cluster had been successful...'

The Chapter Master shook his head. 'It was not. Dragos is gone. Grieve for your brother-captain along with the rest, though it seems that his vacant office as Consul of Sothara is likewise no more.'

First Captain Dragos too, then. It was a curious thing, but Thracian found that he had little surprise nor any grief left to express at the news of each fresh misery.

'And Agaitas?'

'He is on board the flagship, seeing to his company as well as the remains of the First. We will appoint the con- that is, *Dragos*' successor in due course. What of the other companies?'

'Decimated. Just over two hundred and fifty survivors, in total. Theodosios and the Fifth never returned from the initial patrol, but their warning was all we had.'

Thorcyra winced. 'And the outer planets? The *Aegida* orbital? The serf militia and senatorial guard from Sothopolis?'

Thracian said nothing. How could he?

The Chapter Master understood, and clapped a sympathetic hand upon Thracian's pauldron. Then he turned, raising his voice so that he could be heard by all upon the embarkation deck.

'Brothers and honoured servants of the Chapter – we endure. Make no mistake, I am distraught that our enemies have wounded us so deeply, but thanks to the valiant efforts of Captain Thracian and the sacrifices made by our fallen brethren and retainers, we remain *unbroken*. Let us mourn Sotha's loss, but stride ever forwards and never forget the lessons we have learned. Our eternal duty is to the people of the Imperium, and we will not allow this same fate to befall another world while even a single one of us yet stands with a falx in his hand.'

At the mention of this far more noble calling, the assembled Scythes visibly straightened, their expressions hardening. Thorcyra walked between them as he spoke, addressing Space Marine and mortal alike with equal measures of respect and dignity.

'I would have future generations see this as the dawning of a new age in

our glorious history. We will salvage whatever we can from the ashes of our defeat, and we will bring our vengeance home upon the foul xenos. Salvation shall be ours, brothers and sisters – salvation shall be ours.’

He gestured out through the shimmering atmospheric field at the mouth of the hangar, to the planet below.

‘It is my intention to establish a new fortress-monastery here, at the Giant’s Coffin. We will fortify, and we will rebuild. From the hardy stock of Miral Prime will we raise our new battle-brothers, and this world shall become our home. Let no foe – xenos, witch or rebel – believe that we shall ever be set adrift again.’

Cheers went up, along with cries of ‘*For Sotha!*’ and ‘*Salvation!*’ from the viewing galleries overhead. Salutes were exchanged, and fresh oaths sworn and witnessed.

Thracian would have to admit that he was surprised. He had anticipated only a relatively short stopover at Miral before the Chapter was ordered on again to a more solid tactical position, from which to launch their inevitable counter-attack upon the hive fleets.

But then, he wondered if that was simply what *he* would have done, if Thorcyra had never made it back...

Composing himself, he caught Sergeant Romonos’ eye amidst all the rest. The two of them approached the Chapter Master, who was already conversing with his own serf-adjutant.

Thracian cleared his throat. ‘By your leave, my lord, I will depart for the surface and begin preparations for our permanent settlement at the Coffin. There are warriors in my fallen brothers’ companies who appeared to resent my assumption of command, and—’

Thorcyra dismissed the notion with an absent wave.

‘No, you should remain here with the fleet,’ he said. ‘You have served well, but I shall take command of the Miral operation. I will need a full report.’

The Chapter Master was signing off a series of proffered order papers and did not look up. Romonos shot Thracian a quizzical glance, but they both waited patiently for him to finish.

‘It has always troubled me, Thracian,’ Thorcyra muttered. When he finally turned to them once more, his expression was weary. ‘The name, I mean. Until now, I never believed that giants could die.’



# CHAPTER FOUR

## DEATH WORLD

All things considered, it had not taken Master Thorcyra long to reassert himself. The Scythes of the Emperor had still been reeling from their defeat at Sotha, but young Thracian had done the best he could. As a member of the apothecarion, Machaon would serve whomsoever commanded the Chapter without question, as was his duty. Only now did he realise that he had long since come to terms with the likely death of Thorcyra, and in his mind he had already accepted Thracian as the rightful successor.

Standing before them, Machaon looked to where the captain sat now, at Thorcyra's left hand at the grand table and opposite Brother-Captain Agaitas. In contrast to the commander of Second Company, Thracian had the look of someone who carried his own titles as a burden rather than an honour.

Also, considering that these staterooms aboard the *Heart of Cronus* were nominally his – for the moment, at least – he seemed the least comfortable of all those present.

Machaon caught his eye as he looked up, and felt an unexpected twinge of sympathy in his hearts. Thracian's time would come.

Followed quickly by the two captains, Master Thorcyra rose, and nodded

to his honour guard. 'Leave us.'

Striking the heels of their scythes rhythmically upon the deck plates as they marched from the chamber, the two veterans drew the great doors shut after them. Only then did Machaon turn to his charge, speaking to him in a low voice.

'Are you ready for this, brother? If you need more time...'

Spiridonas shook his head. 'I am ready.'

The Librarian's features were drawn, but his bloodshot eyes were hard with a steely mental resolve. Though still not fully recovered from his ordeal, physically speaking, Machaon had allowed him to answer the returned Chapter Master's summons, given the nature of their ongoing situation. Dressed in a loose meditation robe and the thin, woven lattice of his psychic hood, Spiridonas leaned heavily upon the force staff that had been returned to him, his limbs shaking almost imperceptibly.

Almost.

Thorcyra saluted the Librarian, and Agaitas and Thracian both echoed the gesture. Even so, all three of them remained standing in their places at the table.

'Brother-Codicier Spiridonas, it is good to see you back among us. Captain Thracian told me of your selfless heroism during the evacuation from our home world. I cannot overstate it – without you, I would not have much of a Chapter left to command.'

Machaon noted that Thracian would not look at them directly. His gaze wandered uneasily between the table and the mosaic-lined walls.

Spiridonas bowed his head in gratitude. 'I did only what was required, my lord. No one should ever be praised for performing their most basic of duties.' His eyes fell to Thracian as he continued. 'It is an ancient wisdom that there is no heroism in survival.'

The captain twitched at the Librarian's words, but Master Thorcyra seemed not to notice.

'Nonsense,' he replied. 'You went above and beyond what was required, and in so doing saved many thousands of lives. The blood of Sotha has been preserved, by your noble deeds. The Scythes of the Emperor have ever stood upon the strongest foundations, be that the rock of Mount Pharos or the unwavering loyalty of our mortal retainers. Now that we are given the opportunity to build our Chapter anew, I mean to start with

strong foundations again.’

Never one for fancy rhetoric, Machaon felt his own attention beginning to wander. He regarded Agaitas – the way the captain hung on Thorcyra’s every word, and made a show of silently agreeing with him wherever possible. With all this talk of new beginnings and recently vacated positions, were the Scythes actually beginning to succumb to vanity and ambition, even in the face of a new Tyrannic War?

‘As you know,’ Thorcyra continued, ‘the Chapter’s headquarter divisions have suffered greatly – the Chaplaincy is gone, my command echelon reduced to a mere handful. You are the sole survivor of the Librarian, and as such I am naming you as Chief Librarian of the Scythes of the Emperor.’

Thracian looked surprised. Agaitas beamed.

Machaon raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Spiridonas wavered, steadying himself upon his staff. ‘My lord, this honour... This is...’

The Chapter Master raised a hand. ‘Obviously, you do not have your predecessor’s centuries of experience, nor the pool of potential trainees that Lord Tormal maintained at Mount Pharos. But in time, we will replenish your numbers. I believe that the line companies will be back at operational strength within, say, ten to twelve years. In the meantime, we will second you to one of our cousin Chapters to complete your training, and send all new recruits that demonstrate—’

‘No!’ Spiridonas shrieked. ‘This is pointless!’

The lumens mounted above the table burst out in a shower of sparks and shattered glass, and all four of the other Space Marines flinched away from the robed Librarian, Machaon included. The air around the chamber seemed to crackle, putting the sour aftertaste of someone else’s rage into the back of his throat.

Rage, and something else.

Was it... *fear*?

Spiridonas’ psychic hood glowed faintly in the gloom, and he breathed heavily as he sought to compose himself. A thin trickle of red ran from the corner of one closed eye.

‘Forgive me, my lords,’ he murmured. ‘But they are so close now.’

Thorcyra edged around the table. Thracian remained where he was,

gripping the back of his seat and not taking his eyes off Spiridonas.

Putting himself between the Chapter Master and his charge, Machaon held out his hands beseechingly. ‘My lords, I must insist that we end this audience for the time being,’ he said. ‘I mean to say, *the Chief Librarian* is indisposed and should be allowed to return to his sanctuary. Captain Thracian will attest to this. He has seen it before.’

Agaitas and Thorcyra looked to Thracian, who nodded emphatically. ‘This is how he was the last time,’ he confirmed. ‘After the warp jump.’

Thorcyra turned back to Machaon, his confusion apparent. ‘I don’t understand – what did you–’

He stopped short, staring beyond the Apothecary.

‘Oh, Holy Terra...’

Machaon spun around, coming face to face with Spiridonas and gazing into wide eyes that burned as black and cold as night. A miasma of glabrous, liquid darkness boiled slowly in the air about him like some unspeakable aura.

‘They are almost here,’ the Librarian said, in a voice that was barely his own. ‘I can feel them all around. They are the shadow in the warp, the darkness that pursues us across the stars. It has followed us all the way from Sotha, and we will never escape it.’ He moved his alien gaze to Master Thorcyra. ‘Forgive me, my lord, but to speak of our Chapter’s bright future is hubris of the worst kind. The Great Devourer has acquired a taste for our noble, Sothan blood, and it is only a matter of time...’

Agaitas went to draw his pistol, but Thracian held him back.

‘Trust me – that would be a very *bad* idea,’ he whispered.

In all his years, Machaon had never seen anything like it. The Librarian, who had witnessed such unspeakable, alien horror since the death of Sotha, now seemed completely overcome by it.

It was almost hypnotic. It was like staring into the endless, intergalactic void. The nothingness itself from which the xenos had come.

Spiridonas turned slowly towards Thracian. He stared at the captain for a long moment, and the aura around him began to pulse and twist menacingly. ‘You. You will lead the children of–’

With precision born of countless battlefield surgeries, Machaon jabbed the Librarian in the exposed side of his neck with a hypoderm. A double dose of nerve-block should have put even the hardest battle-brother out

like a broken lumen, but its effect on Spiridonas was far less immediate. His jaw went slack, his head rolling around to stare at the Apothecary even as the force staff slipped from his fingers.

Thorcyra was roaring for his veterans to help subdue the stricken psyker, but Machaon guided Spiridonas down to the deck with a fraternal care, protecting his skull with the spread fingers of one hand.

But even immobilised, his eyes remained wide and dark.

Standing a few metres away, Captain Thracian was frozen in place, his hands trembling as he let his breath out in slow, measured gasps. ‘What was he about to say?’ he whispered to Machaon.

The Apothecary did not respond. He scanned Spiridonas’ vital signs, and his psionic-cerebral activity in particular. They were levelling out to something approaching normal. The cold, shadowy miasma had leached away into the deck beneath him.

Only then did the blackness leave his eyes, slipping away like oil on water, and his body sagged into unconsciousness.

Spiridonas remembered nothing of his outburst, even when he was brought round again with the assistance of a crisis-medicae team. Once the Librarian had been led back to his sanctuary, Machaon remained outside Thracian’s staterooms with the two guards, pacing and cracking his knuckles one at a time.

This was far beyond him. He would let the three of them work it out – company captains and Chapter Master together.

Thracian had always been quite open. He had assumed that they would move on quickly, taking only what the Chapter needed from Miral before making another calculated jump away. When he arrived, for some reason Thorcyra had had other ideas, wanting to lay down roots and establish a new bridgehead against the Kraken, though if Spiridonas was right then it seemed that the Scythes no longer had the luxury of time to prepare.

Did the key to their survival perhaps lie somewhere in between?

Machaon shrugged to himself. He and his brother Apothecaries possessed the knowledge and skills to create as many new Scythes as the Chapter required: all they lacked were the reserves of gene-seed.

But that would come. As each new generation matured into full battle-brothers, the progenoids could be harvested and their investment would

slowly multiply. With almost four hundred survivors now accounted for across the fleet, they had ample stock.

He did the calculations in his head one more time.

More than enough, as long as they did not suffer too many more casualties in whatever punitive actions Master Thorcyra was planning against the xenos invaders that had taken Sotha...

Machaon was satisfied. Whatever course of action was agreed, he would simply urge his commanders to be cautious, and pragmatic. There were some things that should never be gambled, no matter how certain the—

Hearing the sound of brisk, armoured footfalls amidst the staid bustle of serf crewmen, he looked up and saw a single battle-brother approaching. His face was unfamiliar, though his armour bore the markings of Seventh Company – it did, however, seem curiously clean and unscathed compared to the plate of many who had fought in the evacuation.

*One of the lucky ones, perhaps,* he mused. It was all relative, of course.

The warrior saluted the veteran guards as he passed under the archway. ‘*Salve*, brothers. I would speak with Master Thorcyra.’

Slightly perturbed by his forthright manner, they regarded him carefully.

‘Impossible,’ said one. ‘The Chapter Master is unavailable for the time being. Security has been stepped up.’

‘He will want to hear this. I have valuable information about the destruction of our home world.’

Machaon stared. Of all the things he might have expected to hear spoken so casually and openly in the corridors of this ship, *that* was not one of them. Clearly of the same mind, the guards visibly bristled.

‘What did you say?’ the second of them growled, tightening his grip upon the haft of his scythe.

Looking again at the newcomer with some incredulity, Machaon noted that his complexion was remarkably fair, and his eyes darkened by the gene-crafting processes of the Adeptus Astartes – like so many Scythes, he bore the classic hereditary traits of a true Sothan, though much muted by his ascension. His bare scalp was smooth, clearly kept shaved and oiled in spite of all their recent hardships.

‘I believe you heard me, brother, but very well. I have valuable information—’

‘Who are you?’ Machaon interrupted him.

‘My name is Brother Hadrios.’

The first veteran stepped forwards, pushing him back with a firm hand in the middle of his breastplate. ‘Brother Hadrios, protocol requires that you take this information to your commanding officer first. If he deems it as valuable as you claim, he’ll bring it to Master Thorcyra on your behalf.’

Hadrios shook his head, not seeming to sense any threat from the burly warrior before him. His voice remained calm and measured. ‘Captain Argus is dead.’

The guard frowned. ‘Your sergeant, then. Your appointed squad leader. I don’t care. You’re not seeing the Chapter Master, not now.’ He shoved Hadrios again, more forcefully this time. ‘I must insist that you leave this transit way and follow the security protocols more closely.’

Hadrios seemed slightly perplexed, but stood his ground. Then he glanced back at Machaon, seeing him again as though for the first time.

‘You are the Apothecary. You tended to Brother Spiridonas, after he brought us here from Sotha.’

Machaon could not decide exactly why, but something in Hadrios’ tone unsettled him. It sounded almost like an accusation.

He made to reply, but Hadrios’ eyes flickered to the sealed doorway behind them, and he bowed curtly before backing away. ‘And so it is, brothers. I am sorry to have intruded.’

As he turned and strode back the way he had come, the other veteran lowered his blade and snorted. ‘He seems a troubled soul, no?’

Chuckling and exchanging a few mildly disparaging comments, the two guards returned to their post. Machaon ignored them, trudging a short way up the corridor with his eyes on Hadrios’ retreating back. The warrior glanced from side to side as he went, like an unblinking coral ray gliding through the shallows.

The Apothecary tapped a note into his wrist-display for future reference.

*Hadrios. Seventh Company. Argus.*

The days were long on Miral Prime. Literally. Thirty-two hours, seventeen minutes, by Terran standards, though apparently the relative hours of daylight and darkness did not vary much from one long season to the next.

For seven such days, they had been led on a merry little jaunt by their guide, and Culmonios’ patience was all but spent.

The jungle was dense, and dark. At times, he would swear that he could feel it actively resisting him, as surely as any foe that he had faced upon the field of battle. From atop the Coffin, the leafy canopy had given a false impression of serenity.

Beneath it, at ground level, the planet's ecosphere was practically at war with itself.

Carnivorous vegetation was the least of the many threats, though it was the one they encountered most often. Even the berserk quadruped stalkers that would gallop through the undergrowth and vault into the lower branches in pursuit of their prey seemed to know better than to stray beneath the trailing fronds of the bloodthirsty stinger-trees – fronds that turned bright red when they latched on to a living creature and began to drink.

Now the two armoured Space Marines edged their way carefully through a grove of balloon-like cacti with thick, venomous spines. Young Hwylgir, perched above them on a mossy fallen log, cocked his head at their lack of progress.

'Him is have careful, *Giant-Culimoss*,' he chirped in broken Gothic, his toothy grin shining out from a grubby, pale face. 'In little scratch is kill even bigger than you.'

Culmonios grimaced behind his visor, clicking open the vox-channel to his companion. 'I can't understand a thing this little savage says. What does he want to know?'

Distracted, Brother Keltru pushed on. 'I don't think he asked a question. Something about the poison, maybe?'

Hwylgir laughed as Culmonios looked up at him. He still seemed to find the vox-grilles of their helmets amusing. The little simpleton had insisted on pulling a grimacing frown-face when they first donned them, presumably trying to mirror the grille shape with his mouth. 'Why brother-giants to anger?' he had cackled over and over, until Culmonios put a stop to it.

This. This was the future of their Chapter.

Culmonios let out a long sigh, adjusting the weight of his slung equipment pack.

'Come on, boy – do you even know where we are? How much farther?'

Hwylgir frowned. 'Father-giant? Not brother-giant?'

‘What?’

‘Father-giant, *Thor-kay-ra.*’ He pointed into the sky, unseen above the thick jungle canopy. ‘Thorkayra. Soon come him at Giant Coffin?’

Keltru paused, and looked over to Culmonios. ‘I think this devious little wretch understands a lot more of what we say to each other than he lets on. You should try—’

The Mirali youth suddenly tensed, holding his rag- cloaked body low against the fallen trunk. His flint blade glinted dully in the leaf-filtered sunlight, and he scanned the vegetation all around with quick, beady eyes. Something had spooked him.

Culmonios brought his crested shield up in guard, the bare, crudely polished bone a stark contrast against the dark armour of his vambrace. He dialled his auto-senses up almost reflexively. He felt Keltru turning at his back, covering their rear with slow sweeps of his bolter’s muzzle.

It was only then that Culmonios realised that the ever- present sounds of the jungle had dropped away to almost nothing. No insect chorus, no bird calls.

Only the sigh of the hot, misty breeze.

He gave two sub-vocal clicks over the vox, urging his brother to silence. They would rely on battle-sign only.

After a few tense seconds, Keltru signed quickly with his free hand.

*No contact. I see nothing.*

Though he was only too happy to point out the trog- savage’s very many failings, Culmonios was quick to acknowledge that this was Hwylgir’s domain, and until the boy said otherwise, he would assume that they were in danger from somewhere.

Moving slickly down the log like a lizard, Hwylgir dropped to the ground and slipped quietly between the spines of the cacti without apparent effort. Then he turned to the Space Marine with a haunted expression, and beckoned wordlessly.

Gesturing away into the jungle, Culmonios tried to mime his confusion. What was out there? Where was the threat?

The boy surprised him by carefully signing back a reply. It was a strange thing, but the training sergeants had told them that the natives seemed able to achieve near-fluency in the Scythes’ battle-sign dialect long before they could master even basic Low Gothic. However, now was not the time to

dwell upon the fact that neither Culmonios nor Keltru had actually taken any time to teach him even a single gesture phrase.

As it was, young Hwylgir must have observed them quietly and surreptitiously during the last weeks. Perhaps his kind were not without promise, after all.

But Culmonios had little time to be impressed. The boy signed out the one name that thankfully they had not needed to use, before now.

*Land shark.*

Then he pointed away to the south west, and the two Space Marines followed his direction. Sure enough, though it somehow managed to remain out of sight, they saw the lowest-hanging branches twitch and sway at the creature's oddly stealthy passing.

It was less than fifty metres distant, and drawing closer.

*Pull back, Culmonios signed. Keep low.*

He knew full well that they had better chance of evading the creature than of bringing it down without heavier weaponry than their bolt-weapons and chainswords. He heard Keltru quietly chamber a shell anyway, and drew his own pistol.

As they moved slowly back through the cactus grove, spines scraping gently over their armour plate, he kept the crested shield up, his eyes fixed on the beast's approach. He began to catch the sounds of breaking plant stems and of leaf litter disturbed by its heavy movements.

Cold realisation spread in his gut. He threw his pack to the ground.

'It knows exactly where we are,' he hissed. 'It's trying to trap us!'

He turned to see Keltru with his bolter ready, but of Hwylgir there was no sign. The runty little trog had fled.

'Captain on deck,' Lieutenant Hannelore announced. Across the *Heart of Cronus*' bridge, serf crewmen and security officers leapt to attention as Thracian entered through the open hatchway.

He wasted no time on formality. He was not in the mood.

'As you were. We have been given new orders. We are to withdraw to the system's edge along with the strike cruisers *Atreides* and *Gift of Enyo*. From there we will become the first line of defence for Miral Pr—'

He caught himself. The idea still stuck in his craw, even now.

'...for the *home world*. We will establish a patrol perimeter, mining the

debris fields beyond the outer orbit, with one of the three ships never more than six hours from any potential void-engagement. Miral is not a large system, so this is eminently achievable. The outpost on Miral Two maintains its astropathic choir on our behalf, and the *Honour's Might* will remain the only vessel with full Navigator privileges until such time as replacements can be obtained for the rest of us. She alone will stay here, while the rest of the fleet establishes a new anchorage that can be more easily defended.'

*And more easily raided for supplies, he thought. We have become the flagship's unwilling storeroom.*

The serf-lieutenant nodded, slotting her stylus into the side of her ever-present data-slate. 'Then the honourable Warden has chosen to heed your counsel, my lord?'

Forcing down the lingering sense of chagrin, he approached the command throne. Although Shipmaster Devanti was still in the care of the medicae adepts, Thracian could not bring himself to be seated, and instead stood just to the left of the dais while he keyed their mission outline into the newly restored hololith.

Hannelore appeared at his side, but Thracian did not look away from the interface.

'There is no Warden of the Pharos any more, lieutenant,' he replied, curtly, 'because there is no longer a Pharos to ward. Sotha is gone. He is simply Chapter Master Thorcyra of the Scythes of the Emperor now.'

She raised her eyebrows, taken aback by his dismissive tone. 'Simply?'

He glowered at her. He was tired of his manner being implicitly questioned.

'Perhaps, if it pleases you,' he snapped, 'then one day he might be named "Grand High Chieftain of the Giant's Coffin", lieutenant. And no, Master Thorcyra has dismissed the warnings of our new Chief Librarian. He believes that Spiridonas has been scarred by his psychic contact with the xenos, and that his vision is clouded as a result. Of course, reason and logic holds that it is impossible for the hive fleets that took Sotha to have journeyed anywhere near Miral at sub-warp speeds in that time – since much of Spiridonas' dark testimony is founded upon that flawed notion, *we* are apparently choosing to ignore it.'

He thumped a few keys in succession, as if to make his point. The

hololith-cogitator let out a short, protesting whine.

Hannelore shook her head. ‘But we know that there are many distinct tyranid fleets beneath the shadow of the Kraken, my lord. We have heard from dozens of—’

‘Enough, lieutenant! Until we have corroborated details of the approach of any new xenos threat, we are simply to remain vigilant and support the Chapter Master’s decisions.’

A hush had fallen over the bridge, though the various deck personnel were trying hard not to make it too noticeable. Thracian saw Hannelore’s cheeks flush, her eyes drop to the deck, and he remembered that her relative inexperience was not so unlike his own. He raised a hand, and lowered his tone a little.

‘We have our orders, lieutenant. Appointed Chief Librarian Spiridonas will be sent to further his mastery of the warp under another Chapter’s instruction at the first opportunity, as Master Thorcyra has rightly decreed.’ Thracian narrowed his eyes for a moment, his thoughts elsewhere. ‘If only we could all just *send away* those who disagree with us, eh?’

Hannelore straightened the collar of her tunic, making a visible effort to still her trembling hands.

‘May I speak freely, my lord?’

‘Please.’

She bit the inside of her lip, carefully considering what she was about to say before daring to open her mouth.

‘Chapter Master Thorcyra was not at Sotha, my lord. He does not know what the rest of us saw, and what we fought against. By all accounts, the xenos have changed tack since the last war. This staggered deployment across the Eastern Fringe, their infiltration of empty regions before an assault – none of it sounds like the way that the tyranids of Hive Fleet Behemoth moved against the Imperium.’

She held up her slate, displaying a galactic regional map of the Sotharan League that had been annotated based on the various reports and communiqués received in all the months before and since the Chapter had left Sotha. The xenos’ movements were random almost to the point of incomprehensibility, but where notable Imperial strongholds existed, the reports of hive fleet activity always converged.

Moreover, they were dated back much further. This had the look of an insidious, alien plan many decades in the making, if not longer.

‘Thorcyra hopes to rally and rebuild the Scythes of the Emperor. I remind you that you gave me permission to speak freely, here, but in aiming to give us focus, he has in fact robbed us of it. Under your temporary leadership we were readying ourselves to face the unknown, whereas now we prepare for the future when the present is still uncertain. We do not yet have the full measure of the Kraken, and so it feels like we are building our Chapter’s new foundations on nothing more stable than delta sand.’ She paused again, fixing him with a quietly insistent glare. ‘Something *is* coming. You don’t need to be a trained psyker like Lord Spiridonas to feel it.’

Thracian was surprised by her words. He nodded slowly.

‘Careful, serf-lieutenant,’ he muttered. ‘I’m beginning to appreciate your candour.’

Hannelore exhaled, relieved. She drew up to attention again. ‘Then what are your orders, my lord?’

‘My orders remain the same – assign the fleet to a new anchorage over Miral Two, and prepare the *Atreides* and the *Gift of Enyo* for extended patrol duties.’

The lieutenant faltered. ‘But–’

‘We must act as one,’ Thracian insisted. ‘There are too many variables here, and so much we do not yet understand about the foe we must surely face again soon. Each of us must attend to our duties, battle-brother and serf alike.’

‘But by focusing our numbers in this one system for an extended period, we make ourselves a target for the Kraken, my lord. With all due respect, whether or not the xenos are truly aware of who or what the Scythes of the Emperor are, they will come for us. Sooner or later.’

The captain nodded. ‘I agree with you entirely. But our specific duty is to safeguard the rest of the fleet. I could not do that effectively if Brother-Captain Agaitas had not taken responsibility for the first of his own appointed duties – to meet with those mewling civilian wretches and hear their long litany of complaints about the way we have been treating them. Can you imagine?’

Hannelore half smiled, her own personal unease over this particular issue

still quite apparent. Thracian shrugged.

‘Well, I hear that he has arranged for delegates to meet with Master Thorcyra at some point, in order to negotiate their servitude in exchange for our ongoing protection. I wouldn’t have given it a second thought, but by framing it as an ambassadorial exchange Agaitas has made them think it’s their own free choice. Masterful. I bet Dragos would have been proud – his ceremonial role as consul was never anything more than political posturing to keep the people of Sothara in line.’

He looked back to the hololith, satisfied that he had made his point.

‘Take a note, lieutenant. I want those refugees out of our cargo bays and into gainful employment as soon as possible. Shipment handling, magazine inventory. Even the galleys. Those who can’t work are to be sent over to other vessels at the anchorage. Same goes for the *Atreides* and *Enyo*.’

Beyond the wide viewports, he saw that the fleet was already beginning to break formation for Miral II, with the sole exception of the *Honour’s Might*.

‘It took me a long time to gain the respect of many of my brothers, and indeed some among the mortal crew of this very ship – far longer than it should have, by any measure. I dare say that there are still those who think me unsuitable for the level of responsibility that I have inherited. But I am a captain of the Adeptus Astartes, and I *will* be obeyed.’

He saluted the grim silhouette of the flagship, hanging above Miral Prime like a harbinger of the Emperor’s holy vengeance. She was the only Chapter vessel over which he yet had no dominion.

‘I never asked for this command, but now I intend to make it my own.’



# CHAPTER FIVE

## FOR THE FUTURE

Without any thought of looking for young Hwylir, Culmonios ran.

His twin heartbeats thundered in his ears as he crashed through the undergrowth, with Brother Keltru not more than a few paces behind. The two of them had abandoned any notion of stealth, or of trying to outwit the creature.

‘I still can’t see it!’ Keltru yelled.

This was not about fear. Their headlong flight was a tactical withdrawal, or so Culmonios kept telling himself.

*Like Sotha.*

The dishonourable thought sprang unbidden to his mind, and he cast it aside immediately.

They simply did not have the means to meet a land shark in open combat. They didn’t even really know what a land shark *was*, beyond vague, legendary descriptions and the fact that it was an object of terror to spacefarers across Ultima Segmentum.

No one had listened to him – this was exactly the kind of situation that he had foreseen, back at the bastion. As far as he was concerned, without their guide the mission was over. Why risk their own lives by facing down a wild predator in the depths of the jungle?

It was not the same as facing a tyrannid warrior, or confronting some other enemy of the Imperium – those were battles to defy an opponent, to thwart his malign intentions. If the land shark had not been chasing them, then it would only be chasing something else. It did not see an enemy to be vanquished for a righteous cause or material gain. It simply needed to fill its belly.

As it was, on the death world of Miral Prime, this was just another training vector. A way to weed out weaker recruits before wasting valuable gene-seed upon them.

Culmonios laughed to himself. It was apparently easier to be philosophical when you were running for your life.

The sound of splintering tree trunks and falling brush followed in their wake, and he finally stole a glance backwards.

Nothing. Nothing other than the clear wake of its pursuit, coursing through the low foliage like a hurricane. *Was it camouflaged, or...*

Cursing himself for a fool, Culmonios pointed.

‘It’s underground. The damned things live underground!’

Keltru spun, running sideways with his bolter held up, trying to comprehend what Culmonios was saying. ‘What?’

They were coming around in a wide loop, being driven by this subterranean beast back towards the slopes that led up to the low southern mesas. Hwylgir had insisted that the trog tribes they sought would make their seasonal home in this area, but so far the three of them had found nothing.

And then, in that instant, it made sense.

Why did the tribes on Miral come back to the caves, year after year, instead of living freely in the jungle? Why did they keep no fixed settlements, and venture out only to hunt and forage, or to blood their young warriors?

Because of the land sharks. The apex predators. In the manner of their aquatic namesakes, they swam through the soft, loamy earth of the jungle floor with ease, but Culmonios would wager that the rocky mesas were impassable to them – or, at least, might force them above ground and into the open where they were more vulnerable.

This revelation was of little use to them now, of course. The beast was gaining, and fast. He had to act.

‘Break left,’ he cried out. Keltru obeyed instantly, and the two of them crossed paths before heading in separate directions. ‘Stay in vox-contact!’

Culmonios made for a group of lichen-covered boulders in a shaded hollow. He vaulted up the nearest facing, his armoured boots clattering and skidding on the slippery rock, but managed to drag himself upright. Panting hard at the summit, he turned back to see his battle-brother desperately zigzagging from side to side as he ran.

From this elevated position, Culmonios could actually make out the shape of the land shark as it moved beneath the soil. It pushed trees and foliage stems aside, tearing through their unseen root networks, drawn with alarming speed towards the only vulnerable prey it could still sense.

‘Keltru! Get off the ground!’

Unnerved, Keltru turned and fired a flurry of random shots into the undergrowth. ‘Where is it? I have no visual! Tell me what—’

The land shark burst up through the ground before he could finish, in a deluge of soil and loose rock fragments, knocking him onto his back.

Even though most of its bulk was still beneath the surface, its huge size was apparent; it was easily eight metres long, with a series of fin-like appendages running the length of its body. It had no eyes, but its bullet-shaped snout opened to reveal a yawning mouth with row upon row of sawblade teeth, and a muscular gullet that looked like it could snap tree trunks.

The singular most horrifying thing about it was that it made no sound. It did not roar or growl or bellow as Culmonios half expected it to. Rather, its attack was heralded only by the earthy thunder of its movements, and the breaking of nearby branches against its dark hide.

Then it clamped its jaws down around Keltru’s left greave. The Space Marine screamed, scrabbling for his fallen bolter, but the weapon had fallen out of his reach.

Culmonios roared in anger and frustration. ‘Use your damn pistol!’

The beast dragged itself forwards on stumpy forelimbs, pawing at the nearest tree trunks with what appeared to be prehensile flippers in order to gain purchase. Keltru stamped into its snout over and over with his free leg, cursing and raging as he tried to draw his sidearm.

Seemingly oblivious, the land shark snapped its jaws again and dragged him further into its maw.

The front rows of teeth bit deeply into his thighs, twisting his other leg at an unnatural angle and cleaving through ceramite, plasteel and bone like they were nothing more than matchwood. Keltru howled in agony, his holstered sidearm quite forgotten as he tried to wrench directly at the monster's jaws with his gauntleted hands.

Culmonios dropped to the ground, his own pistol already in his grip. He put shot after shot into the thing's back, each mass-reactive shell blowing ruddy pockmarks in its flesh but seeming to do little lasting damage.

The land shark twisted itself around, Keltru still swinging from the side of its mouth. It shoved itself further from the now gaping rift that it had torn in the jungle floor, steadying itself before thrashing its head from side to side.

Aghast, Culmonios saw his shrieking battle-brother shaken like a rag doll, the power of the land shark's movement sawing his mangled legs back and forth over its serrated teeth. It was a primitive, brutal bite, designed to carve prey into smaller mouthfuls.

Arterial blood splattered the beast's snout, and Keltru's limp form snapped free, hurled insensible into the undergrowth. His legs remained hanging from its jaws, staining the lipless maw red.

*Not this, Culmonios thought. Not like this. Not after Sotha. Not after the xenos.*

*Not for those filthy Mirali savages...*

He realised that his hand was already upon the hilt of his chainsword. He drew it, and gunned the motor. Some of the unquenchable fury he had felt during the fighting on the *Pale Rider* began to return, burning like hot acid through his more rational thoughts.

The land shark was no longer just a wild, death world beast. It was his enemy.

Were all things that could bite and claw and pierce now as foes to the Scythes of the Emperor? By the cold arithmetic of survival, must they now fight not only the tyranids but also the *universe*, if they were to endure?

Was it the xenos, or was it death itself that was the Great Devourer?

As he watched the great beast shucking Keltru's severed limbs into its gullet, Culmonios realised that he could no longer tell the difference.

With his shield up, he roared through his helm's vox-grille, and charged.

Paying him no heed, the land shark jerked its conical head back to

swallow the ruined meat and armour. As it did, it exposed the paler flesh of its belly.

Culmonios struck with all his might, carving into it with the spinning teeth of his blade. The beast recoiled, swatting blindly with its stumpy limbs and trying to knock him to the ground, but Culmonios hurled enraged curses along with blow after blow from his chainsword. It felt like attacking a battle tank with a tree branch, but he did not care. He would drive it back or die trying. What was one more futile gesture, after all that the Chapter had faced?

The land shark threw open its wide mouth in another silent bellow. Its hot breath washed over him, and it stank of ammonia and spoiled meat.

Then, swaying wildly to one side, it used its immense bulk to slam him bodily away. He skidded across the mud and fallen leaves, his ears ringing and vision swimming from the force of the impact. He moved groggily, expecting to feel those fearsome jaws closing around him.

But that death never came. With his head canted at an angle to the ground, he felt the earth pitch and swell beneath him as the thing forced its way back under. A shower of loose soil and grit clattered from his war-plate, and he thought he caught a fleeting glimpse of a muscular, rudder-like tail flicking up in the beast's wake as the seismic tremors of its passing subsided.

He lay there for some time, half buried and aching inside his armour, gazing up at the rays of sunlight that danced in the tree canopy above. Slowly, the sounds of the jungle returned.

And voices. Hushed, and quiet, speaking in the savage tongue of the Mirali.

Alerted, Culmonios pulled himself free, rolling onto his hands and knees and casting about for his sword. His auto-senses picked out the figures approaching through the undergrowth – they were thin, wiry humans with ragged cloaks and an assortment of primitive weaponry. They regarded him with a mixture of awe and disgust.

A low moan caught his attention. *Keltru*.

He spun to his feet to see that seven of the diminutive young tribesmen carried his battle-brother's mutilated body out between them. Keltru had lost a lot of blood and was barely conscious, but his transhuman constitution had saved his life.

Culmonios made to help him, but the trogs raised their crooked little spears and urged him back. Some of them were no more than children, less than half his height.

They were brave. He had to give them that.

Then he saw why.

Almost all of them, youths of all ages, bore the branded emblem of the Chapter. It was the twin-scythe mark that the training sergeants used to denote possible new recruits. These were the ones that they had been sent to find.

Sure enough, he spotted young Hwylir at the back of the group, speaking with an older tribesman. Clearly too old to bear the brand, the man wore a short habergeon fashioned from cut bones and animal teeth, with a single sleeve of what Culmonios presumed was cured land shark hide to cover his weapon-arm. He was agitated, and growled at Hwylir as he gestured to the two Space Marines in turn.

Scampering forwards, the guide tugged on Culmonios' arm.

'Him have tell, you a break hunting,' he said. Culmonios didn't understand, until the youth gestured to the group. 'Them hunting shark. Him are *vettai-ruk* – hunting-father. You a break hunting.'

Culmonios looked at the closest trog. The boy could not have been more than eight Terran years old, yet he was blooded with tribal tattoos and wore a short trophy necklace of his own.

This was a hunting party? How could these savages hope to take on a land shark...?

The tribesman strode forwards, facing Culmonios with a hooked club held in his hands. He barked again in his guttural language, and Hwylir tried to keep up.

'Him have tell, how to hunting good if brother-giants wander jungle? Him have call you fool, like no-good mad hunter.'

Gritting his teeth, Culmonios removed his helm and glared down at the hunt master. To his credit, the warrior seemed utterly unimpressed even in the face of an obviously superior opponent – he merely sniffed, and scratched at his bare neck, rattling the bone fetishes of his habergeon.

Culmonios smiled to himself, and trudged back towards the great scar that the land shark had gouged in the earth. He found his skull-shield, and pulled it out from the dirt.

‘I am Brother Culmonios, of the Scythes of the Emperor Chapter, Adeptus Astartes,’ he announced. ‘In the name of the immortal Emperor of Mankind, we claim all rights over your world, and have come to demand tribute from your tribe.’

Flickers of recognition passed between some of the youths at his words, and they whispered to one another, pointing to their scythe brands. Culmonios nodded, and bared the Chapter emblem upon his left pauldron.

‘You see the truth of it, yes, that we are all as one. A great evil has returned, but together the worlds of the Sotharan League will unite against it. We will show you the way.’

He raised the tyrannid skull-crest shield. Even the most gregarious of the trogs flinched at the sight of it: the pure, alien horror of its empty eye sockets and long, dulled fangs.

Culmonios addressed the hunt master, then. ‘This is the face of our enemy. Fearsome warrior of Miral, for disrupting your hunt I offer my most humble apologies. But give freely of your tribe’s young fighters, and we will teach them to hunt a far more deadly prey, out among the stars. For the memory of noble Sotha.’

He held out a gauntleted hand, and waited.

The warrior looked him up and down, dwelling long upon the xenos trophies strung from his battleplate. Culmonios thought back to his tense exchange with Nimeon at the Giant’s Coffin, and felt a fresh twinge of unease.

‘We are all as one,’ he repeated quietly.

The hunt master looked Culmonios in the eye one last time, then gave a rough approximation of the sign of the aquila before taking the Space Marine’s vambrace in a warrior’s handshake.

It was roughly three days later that Thorcyra first set foot upon the surface of Miral Prime. The mesa’s landing platform had been much extended over the past weeks, with the construction of freight transit conveyors and a prefabricated maintenance hangar large enough to accommodate a full flight of escort gunships, as well as the optimisation of the bastion’s fusion reactor to meet their growing needs for power.

All of it was only temporary, of course. The Chapter Master and his retainers had drawn up plans for the construction of a much larger fortress

to replace the bastion within a decade; nothing so grand and impressive as the fortress-monastery that had crowned Mount Pharos, but formidable nonetheless. Secondary sites had already been marked out on the other distant mesas, for gun batteries and even void shield generators serving the Coffin itself, and small scouting groups had begun to establish a basic communications infrastructure. The jungle at the promontory's rocky base had been cut and burned back at least two hundred metres, and construction teams overseen by adepts from the forge on board the *Honour's Might* were sealing up many of the lower cave entrances amongst the crags.

Thorcyra had apparently remarked that the mistakes of the past would be laid to rest in the Giant's Coffin. It was a dark symbolism, but it seemed to strike a chord with those who had survived the death of Sotha.

Halting at the freight conveyer, Machaon directed his serf aides to remain with the containers. 'My lord,' he called out, 'there is no guard here to escort us.'

With his retinue standing nearby, Thorcyra had sunk to his knees in the dirt and did not respond. Machaon made his way uncertainly to the Chapter Master's side.

'My lord, is everything all right?'

Thorcyra gathered up a fistful of gritty earth, and cupped it like a treasure in both hands as he rose to his feet. He brought it closer to his nose, and inhaled gently.

'This world,' he murmured. 'This world is full of potential. I can practically smell it.'

Machaon shifted awkwardly. 'I have heard others remark similarly, though it certainly wasn't potential they thought they were smelling.'

Thorcyra laughed, letting the soil crumble through his fingers before wiping his gauntlets together.

'We have been given a second chance, my Brother- Apothecary. This world is great indeed. Would you not agree?'

'I believe that this world... will *become* great, my lord. With time, and our patience.'

'True enough, brother,' the Chapter Master replied. 'True enough.'

He looked back to the upper ramparts of the bastion, where the Chapter's standard now flew. Newly patched and mended after the expedition's

ignominious return from the Saphir Cluster, the classical image of the Sothan horseman was restored, along with all their centuries of campaign honours. It was an undeniably glorious sight, and for a moment even Machaon found himself almost able to put aside the hundreds of practical and logistical obstacles that stood in their way, and simply share in his master's grand vision for the future.

Then he shifted awkwardly again. Not since his youth had he ever been given to extended bouts of blind optimism.

'My lord, we are ready to proceed. I have brought the larger part of our gene-seed stock down from the fleet's cryo-vaults, but there is no sign of my brother of the apothecarion to take custody of it. Nor is there the escort I was promised by the bastion guard.'

Thorcyra waved away his concern. 'Brother Emrys is seeing to the conditioning of our incoming recruits. He is not expected back at the Coffin for at least a few days.'

The Apothecary faltered, suddenly feeling very exposed out there on the edge of the landing platform. He glanced back at the unloaded cryogenic containers, each one a metre deep and twice that in length, drifting at the foot of the drop-ship's ramp on humming repulsor skids. His human attendants clustered around them, nervously eyeing the Mirali natives and armoured battle-brothers fresh out of the jungle patrols.

These requisitioned medicae adepts still seemed very far from home, no matter how many inspiring speeches Thorcyra might make.

'My lord,' Machaon sighed, 'forgive my boldness, but I don't believe you have thought this through.'

The Chapter Master raised an eyebrow, but did not reply. The Apothecary continued.

'Captain Thracian personally oversaw every step of the procedure to have this material retrieved from the secure vaults on the *Heart of Cronus*, my lord. He personally double-checked, *triple-checked* each seal and serial number on every single flask in those containers, even after I had carried out my own examinations. He queried the security clearance of every mortal retainer involved in the transfer, and he had Sergeant Romonos pick out a pair of cool-headed drop-ship pilots who could be trusted with so valuable a cargo.'

He took off his right gauntlet, and wiped sticky sweat from his brow.

‘We are scraping the proverbial tun, my lord. This is all the gene-seed we have left, and a good many of my fellow Apothecaries – not to mention worthy battle-brothers and who knows how many loyal serf retainers – gave their lives to see this treasure safely off Sotha when the xenos attacked. Captain Thracian honoured their sacrifice with the care he took in ensuring that these containers would be delivered safely to you, now. He even took me from my duties on the wards, tending to our many injured warriors, to convey it directly into the hands of Brother Emrys in the storage chambers that have been prepared beneath the Giant’s Coffin.

‘And yet, my lord, here we are. The cryogenic systems will not function indefinitely, out here in the sun. I can appreciate that you have a great many things to attend to, but this simply will not wait.’

Thorcyra nodded, contrite. ‘Of course, brother. You are—’

‘With the greatest respect, my lord,’ Machaon interrupted him, ‘I have not finished.’

He gestured to the shuffling medicae adepts.

‘Do you see those men and women? Not one of them has been in any way prepared for this excursion to the surface, much less the idea that they will soon have to settle here permanently along with the Chapter. We’ve dragged them out into the wilderness, so far from civilisation that we can’t even be sure of the date any more. More than that, this is a death world. *A death world*. They are Sotharans, one and all – maybe a few will have been in landing parties during their time, but not one of them has seen combat from the ground, and there were precious few survivors from our indentured garrison forces on the home world. Here on Miral Prime, every single day will be a mortal struggle for the people we brought with us. They’ve heard rumours of the deadly jungle, of course, and now they see these feral natives strutting around, being praised as our saviours. So what do our loyal servants have to look forward to? Being bred out by tribesmen, in the gloom of our new fortress.’

The Chapter Master’s expression was haunted, but Machaon felt that the point had to be made.

‘You talk of new beginnings?’ the Apothecary muttered. ‘We can pretend all we like, but this will be the death of them. They too will be buried in the Giant’s Coffin.’

For a long while, Thorcyra was silent. He breathed slowly, staring at the

frightened humans who nonetheless still tried to put themselves between the passing groups of Mirali and the gene-seed containers.

Then he snapped his fingers, and called out to his guard.

‘Veteran! Take your warriors and escort these honoured servants to the cryo-storage chambers. They are to be given your full protection while they complete the transfer of their cargo, and then given our full hospitality for the duration of their stay.’

As the adepts gasped their thanks, the Scythes guided them away, driving the containers up towards the bastion’s main entrance.

Thorcyra turned again to Machaon, and bowed his head, sincerely.

‘You speak with an unexpected quality of wisdom, brother. The Scythes of the Emperor have always valued our mortal kin so very dearly, but sometimes it is easy to forget that they have not the constitution or fortitude of a Space Marine. I would see that they are afforded whatever courtesy we can give them, in the difficult times ahead.’

The Apothecary felt vaguely foolish, but accepted the sentiment behind the words. ‘I’ve just seen a lot of them lately, that is all. I’ve seen the fear in their eyes. We’re supposed to protect them, and lately it seems as though we can barely protect even the notion of our own Chapter’s legacy.’



# CHAPTER SIX

## THE DARKNESS THAT FOLLOWS

There was something in the electronic chime that made Thracian curiously uneasy. It was the same tone and pitch as it ever had been, and it was not accompanied by anything so dramatic as a frantic, hammering knock, nor cries for help from the other side of the doorway.

And yet, on this one particular occasion, he would swear that it sounded different.

Colder, perhaps, like an unexpected call in the dead of night that summons the tearful dreamer to an old mentor's deathbed for the final time.

He hesitated before responding, his hand hovering over the access switch.

So dark had been Thracian's thoughts of late, out here beyond the system-edge. The *Heart of Cronus* prowled the borders of the Chapter's new demesne, and the solitude was an icy, thankless exile while his brethren tamed the wilds of Miral Prime.

He blinked away the melancholy. Such thoughts were not becoming of a captain of the Scythes of the Emperor. He would continue in this duty for as long as Master Thorcyra demanded it.

'Enter,' he called out, placing his loaded bolt pistol out of sight as he rose.

The doors slid open, and a single battle-brother entered his chambers. The warrior was fair-skinned with a gleaming, bare scalp, and dressed in a loose training tunic. Thracian did not recognise him at all.

‘Brother, how may I assist you? The hour is late.’

The warrior was lithe, with a calm, detached air about him. As he approached the conference table, strewn about with navigation charts and sundry other papers, he gazed absently at the unlit mosaics upon the walls.

‘Captain Thracian, my name is Hadrios. I have been seeking an audience with the Chapter Master for some time.’

Thracian frowned. ‘Master Thorcyra is not here. He has not set foot on the *Heart* for many weeks.’

‘I know.’

Hadrios halted at the edge of the table, casting his dark eyes over the paraphernalia there. There was no urgency about him at all – he seemed quite comfortable in the silence that followed his reply.

Thracian made a show of gathering up a handful of documents, waiting for him to explain himself. Hadrios. *Hadrios*. The name was not familiar, not from any of the lists that had been drawn up since their arrival at Miral, and he had been thorough in reading them...

Hadrios simply stared back at him, but there was no malice there.

‘After a while, captain, it occurred to me that Thorcyra might not be the person with whom I should discuss this matter,’ he said, eventually. ‘It is sensitive, to say the least, and I encountered a surprising amount of resistance and interference from those around him.’ He scanned the room again, as though confirming to himself that they were alone. ‘I have to be sure, my lord. I have to be sure of who I can trust.’

Unease grew in Thracian’s gut. He did not like what Hadrios was insinuating. ‘Are you suggesting that there are individuals within the fleet who would seek to keep this knowledge – whatever it is – from our noble Chapter Master?’

Without a second’s hesitation, Hadrios shook his head. ‘No. I am suggesting that there are such individuals within the *Chapter* itself.’

At that, Thracian’s unease became something darker. He glanced at his pistol, lying concealed amidst the documents and data-slates on the tabletop.

‘What, then?’ he demanded. ‘What is it that you wish to bring before

Master Thorcyra, this notional conspiracy of silence aside?’

Hadrios narrowed his eyes. ‘Can I trust you, Captain Thracian?’

‘Your tone suggests that you already do. That, or you have no one else left to confide in. Either way, we both already know that you are going to tell me.’

Warily, Hadrios reached out to the largest navigational chart before them. It was a map of the Sotharan League and the periphery, and he pointed to their home world itself, now starkly and unceremoniously struck through in red ink.

‘It is Sotha, my lord. I know how the xenos were able to take the home system of a Space Marine Chapter, in spite of all our carefully laid defences and everything we threw at them in the final hours. I know why it was that they were drawn to our world above all others, and why they follow us still. Furthermore, I can prove that this was all no mere accident of galactic geography.’

Thracian looked up slowly. He was caught between disbelief and outrage.

‘Do you... Do you dare to suggest that the hive fleets were lured to Sotha... deliberately?’

‘Indeed,’ Hadrios replied. ‘And I believe that the gates were left unbarred to them from within. Speaking figuratively, of course.’

White noise began to pound in Thracian’s skull. His entire reality, everything he knew to be fact, seemed to be slipping off by a few degrees with every heartbeat, turning in upon itself with a sickening, irresistible, *inhuman* slowness. Had noble Sotha, home world and protectorate of the Scythes of the Emperor, been betrayed unto its ending?

*If this was true, then... then...*

Without thinking, he snatched up the bolt pistol, screwed his eyes shut and fired.

The report of the shot was almost deafening in the closed chambers. A scattering of debris fell to the floor, pieces of mosaic blown out by the impact of the mass-reactive shell, and the acrid taste of propellant and gun smoke hung in the air.

After a long moment, Hadrios spoke.

‘Captain, your reaction is understandable. But I would prefer that you warn me before discharging your weapon at such close range.’

Numbly, Thracian opened his eyes. He had put his shot through the heart

of Mount Pharos on the far wall, exposing the fine plaster and reinforced metal panelling behind it. A web of cracks had spread through the mosaic from the impact point, fracturing the captain's memory of Sotha as surely as Hadrios' allegations had.

He let the bolt pistol tumble from his grip.

'It's not possible,' he mumbled to himself, over and over again.

Hadrios came to his side, leading him away from the fallen weapon. He still spoke so calmly, so matter-of-factly, and that in itself was profoundly unsettling.

'Come with me, Captain Thracian,' he said. 'There is something I must show you, something I risked a great deal to bring aboard this ship.'

It was some hours before Thracian stumbled back to his chambers, his mind reeling. He fumbled at the hatch with clumsy hands, his eyes clouded with tears and his voice hoarse from screaming his rage in the secluded compartment to which Hadrios had led him. A maintenance servitor had been alerted by his anguished cries and come to offer what assistance it could, but Thracian had battered the mindless wretch into a pulp and shattered its bare, metallic skull against the bulkhead.

What Hadrios had shown him had stunned him almost beyond comprehension. The Chapter had not simply been betrayed, but entirely undone. Thracian had seen the proof of it with his own eyes.

Now he started at shadows, staggering down unlit corridors away from half-imagined alien spectres in the bowels of the ship.

Madness. Darkness.

Was it growing deeper, hour by hour? Was this what Brother Spiridonas had seen, in the endless, feverish dream of the warp jump?

Thracian sealed the door behind him, and collapsed to the deck, retching and writhing. These were not truly *his* quarters. He was no Master of the Fleet.

And yet they were, and he was.

*Damn you, Zebulon! A curse upon your name, for leaving us to wander the void alone...*

He dragged himself back to his feet, tearing at his dark hair and grinding his teeth. Then he took up the crystal ewer from the end of the conference table, and hurled it with all his might at the mosaic of Mount Pharos,

where it shattered into a thousand pieces against the already ruined ceramic. He cried out again, howling his frustration and throwing himself around the chamber in a destructive rampage before sinking to the floor once more, his face creased in torment.

He was hollowed out. He did not know how Hadrios could know the terrible truth behind the fall of Sotha, and bear it with such quiet, observing stoicism.

He watched the frozen blackness of interstellar space roll past the viewports for what could have been minutes, or hours. He had never felt more truly alone, here on this battle-barge crewed by many thousands.

When the tentative knock came, he was not alarmed. He had almost expected it. He had torn the chime controls out with his bare hands.

A pair of serf security officers in carapace plate stood either side of a Militarum courier, one of the many Imperial Guard personnel who had been seconded from the outpost on Miral II to assist the Scythes in their ongoing communications. With his long hair hanging limply over his face, his eyes red-rimmed, Thracian suspected that he must look quite frightful to these slender mortals.

Did that explain the shaking of the courier's limbs? The cold sweat that soaked his uniform? The man was thin and haggard, wearied by endless, thankless hours of vigilant duty, but beyond that he seemed genuinely terrified.

In his hands, he held a terminal scroll. The wax seals had been broken.

Wordlessly, he held it out to Thracian.

The captain took it, unrolling the machine-fed parchment and scanning the origination codes. Then he read the message. It was a fragment of a much longer astropathic transcript.

Strangely, he felt no surprise or horror at the contents – only a sense of detached, pragmatic acceptance.

**++Nova Prospectum, to battle-barge Heart of Cronus.++**

**Sebastion returning to Miral. All cargo accounted for.**

**Warning. Xenos hive ships inbound, confirmed.**

**Estimated time to arrival: six days.**

**We are unprepared for combat. We will tread the circuitous path.**

‘The Coffin is cry loud, Giant-Culimoss,’ Hwylgir murmured. ‘What means it?’

Culmonios did not look down at the boy. His eyes were fixed upon the bastion’s ramparts at the far end of the mesa, and the Sothan colours that flew defiantly from them. He was not sure whether to feel pride or concern at the sight.

His augmented hearing had picked out the sound of distant sirens even before they had left the jungle’s edge, but as the hunting party had trekked over the bald wasteland of recently felled trees, heading for the outer gate, it had become more distinct.

The bastion was under combat alert.

A pair of Stormtalons flew in low, directly over their heads. The lead craft dipped its wing-nacelles as they passed, the pilot most likely seeking a visual on the group before peeling back off to resume his patrol, satisfied that they were non-hostile. From behind the defence walls, Culmonios picked out the rising whine of drop-ship engines as a Thunderhawk transporter rose ponderously from the landing platform, before breaking for orbit on brightly glowing thrusters.

He darted back down the line to the crude litter of branches where the mauled Keltru lay. Five of the bigger and stronger Mirali youths had taken him up as a shared burden, dragging him along with the group even though it slowed their progress through the jungle considerably. But Culmonios had realised that – even if his battle-brother did not survive – to leave him to the wild carrion feeders would have been worse than sacrilege, and worse than a waste of manpower.

It would be a waste of gene-seed. They could not countenance that.

Keltru’s helm and boltgun lay on the litter beside him, placed by the young trogs as reverentially as if he were headed for a grand funeral pyre. The Space Marine was still unconscious, and though his truncated legs were healing gradually, it was a poor heal without the attentions of a medicae. Thick red clots attracted hungry insects in the heat, as much from the ferocity of his immune system as from the blazing Miral sun overhead. There would be no possibility of infection by this stage, but

equally the stumps were knitting themselves closed. Short of further surgical dismemberment to reopen the ragged transhuman musculature, Keltru might not even be suitable for augmetic fittings by now.

‘Almost there, brother,’ Culmonios whispered to him.

Much had changed at the Giant’s Coffin in the weeks since the two of them had struck out into the jungle. Prefabricated lines and emplacements now ringed the outer walls, bristling with auto-batteries, and the air over the inner compound shimmered against the midday heat – a displacement shield, or something similar, to protect the landing zone. The bastion itself had been rendered in places with freshly formed ferrocrete to repair the worst of the death world’s attempts, over the years, to crumble away the ageing fort squatting upon its heart like an armoured, grey tumour.

Farther out on the promontory, the barrels of more Imperial Guard artillery guns protruded from natural defilades in the rock. The might of the Astra Militarum had evidently been summoned to reinforce the Chapter in their time of need.

As they drew closer, klaxons began to sound and the great adamantium-ribbed gates of the barbican ground open a fraction. A handful of armoured serfs – conscripts from the fleet, most likely – emerged, armed with requisitioned lasguns and led by a single veteran Scythe. They spread out around the hunting party, their weapons trained, barking orders for them to halt and submit to security searches while two more in grimy apothecarion robes moved to attend to Keltru.

At Culmonios’ command, young Hwylgir calmed the startled Mirali and persuaded them to throw down their spears and axes. The veteran Space Marine leading the security team strode through the group, a power falx held loosely in one hand.

‘Brother Culmonios,’ he called, without bothering to look at him. ‘We’ve not heard from you in days. You are to accompany me to the bastion immediately.’

Looking up at the slowly traversing auto-turrets on the gatehouse battlements above them, Culmonios flexed his shield arm and stood his ground. ‘What’s going on, gatekeeper? Why are we at full alert?’

‘It’s the Kraken, brother. They’ve found us.’

Thorcyra stood facing the hololithic platform, his features illuminated

only by the lambent blue glow of the avatar that hung before him. Though the tiers of the communications chamber were filled with warriors from the Chapter's decimated companies, along with many human aides, none of them made a sound.

Culmonios and the gatekeeper slipped quietly between them. The tension in the air was an almost palpable thing, though much coloured by the same rising outrage with which Culmonios had become so familiar of late.

He hesitated when he saw the face of the projection at the centre of the chamber – his voice warbling with atmospheric distortion, Captain Thracian was addressing their master, and his words held the attention of everyone present.

*'Our long-range sensors detect something approaching the system, though it is still too far out for meaningful auspex readings. Sebastion's message was somewhat vague, but it did suggest multiple hive ships and many hundreds of attendant vessels, already having penetrated the sector boundary.'*

Thorcyra's expression was grim. 'What confirmation do we have? Can we verify the forge master's claims for ourselves?'

*'The shadow of the Kraken is descending, for certain. The astropaths at the Militarum outpost confirm that their abilities are diminishing by the hour – they will be secluded, for their own safety.'* He paused, as if confirming some unspoken detail for himself. *'But I'm afraid these simply cannot be the same tyrannid vessels that took Sotha, my lord. Their movements would make no sense, especially given the relatively short time since our evacuation. Based on the information from the Nova Prospectum, we have given this new grouping the provisional designation of Splinter Fleet "Miral Rex". Transmitting all data to you now, for tactical cogitation.'*

Edging through the assembly, Culmonios spotted Brother Nimeon. The veteran stood at ease with his hands clasped behind his back, and yet he seemed far from relaxed. Culmonios drew up in the space beside him, giving the warrior a nudge with the rim of his pauldron.

'Brother,' Nimeon whispered, nodding a greeting but reluctant to shift his attention from the hololithic exchange. 'They say you killed a land shark.'

'Who says that?'

'Everyone.'

Culmonios frowned, and returned his gaze to the Chapter Master. Thorcyra had summoned a three-dimensional map of the Miral System from the projectors, extended out to the galactic east by the input from the sensorium arrays on board the *Heart of Cronus*. In the empty void beyond Miral's outermost orbital path, a vast, red contact slowly spread into being.

It was almost half as wide as the system itself.

Murmurs spread through the chamber. Many had seen such a sight before, in what had later been acknowledged as the first heralding of Sotha's doom.

Thorcyra silenced them all with a raised hand. He scrutinised the contact as it spread, divided, branched; the xenos swarm grew like a tide of bacteria across a culture dish as the cogitators ran their simulation. Culmonios gritted his teeth, feeling that familiar, irrational hatred stirring within his hearts once more, but Thorcyra regarded his foe with an appraising, focused mind.

Then the Chapter Master froze the projection, and pointed to a single, encroaching tendril of the hive fleet.

'Here, Captain Thracian. This is the first element of the swarm that will threaten the inner worlds. You will lead a pre-emptive strike against these specified xenos vessels, buying us more time to prepare our defences here on the surface.'

Thracian's outline stuttered.

*'No, my lord. I will not.'*

A few gasps came from the assembled serfs at the tone of Thracian's reply, and even the Space Marine veterans seemed uneasy. Culmonios, for one, had no love for the captain, nor for the supposed authority of his command, but nonetheless he was still taken aback by such a brazen refusal.

The Chapter Master was quiet for a moment before he responded. 'Would you care to elaborate, captain? I have given you a direct order.'

*'You told us all to remember the lessons that Sotha taught us. I would say that Sotha taught us that undue haste has been our greatest failing. Theodosios led the Fifth Company blindly to their doom at your decree, none of us ever suspecting that such a renewed threat might dwell just beyond our sight, until it was too late. Similarly, your own expedition to*

*Saphir was ill-prepared for direct confrontation with the xenos, even though by then the Chapter should have been expecting the worst.'*

Culmonios and Nimeon exchanged a glance. Neither of them could believe what they were hearing. Did Thracian openly dare to question the wisdom of Master Thorcyra? Surely not. Nonetheless, he continued.

*'In the defence of Sotha, the first launches from the Aegida were lost because we rushed to confront the tyrannid vanguard, acting piecemeal instead of as one.'* Thracian's shadowy, hololithic eyes swept around the chamber. *'We must concede that this enemy has outmanoeuvred us at every turn. I am unwilling to waste the lives of those under my command, now, in favour of those standing with you at the Giant's Coffin. Instead I will take my ship and rendezvous with Forge Master Sebastion, to ensure his safe return.'*

Thorcyra sagged, and ran his gauntleted fingers through his hair.

'Your ship...' he muttered. Then his expression hardened. 'You would abandon your appointed role in this defensive engagement, then. For what?'

*'With all due respect, my lord, the engagement has changed. You charged me with patrolling the borders of Miral to watch for signs of xenos incursion, and now we have them. This is not an abandonment of the role I was given – it is the natural and logical progression of that role. We must assume that we will soon face the full might of Hive Fleet Kraken. Let us commit to this battle fully, and exact our revenge upon the foe.'*

Under the expectant eyes of his followers, Master Thorcyra stood motionless for some time. To Culmonios, he appeared to be scrutinising every detail of Thracian's flickering avatar. For what purpose, it was not clear.

At last, he spoke again.

'You are conflicted, captain. You advise caution, yet seek vengeance. You speak of unity, but act in defiance. This is most unlike you.' He cocked his head slightly. 'Something has changed beyond this tactical data, hasn't it? There is something else, something you are not telling me.'

Thracian faltered. *'I... I would rather... New information has come to light. For now, let it be assumed I would rather say no more than that.'*

'And might I ask why?'

*'Because, my lord, I cannot be sure who else might be listening.'*

With that, Thracian cut the transmission and the hololith died. Cries of surprise and disgust echoed in the chamber. Nimeon gaped.

‘The captain’s gone insane,’ he said. ‘His brain has frozen solid, out there in the void.’

Culmonios found that he had no response for his brother. He simply stared at Thorcyra, who remained standing squarely before the platform in utter disbelief. As well as the manner of their delivery, the implication of Thracian’s words had stunned all present.

A mortal communications officer turned from his station to report. ‘Chapter Master, the *Heart of Cronus* just made an unauthorised warp translation. They’ve left the system, my lord.’

Thorcyra spun around. ‘With no Navigator? That’s madness.’

‘If they had calculated the jump in advance, then it’s possible that...’ The serf trailed off, his eyes falling back to the screen before him as he raised a hand to the vox-bead in his ear. ‘They... They’re following him...’

The Chapter Master stepped very deliberately from the central dais.

‘Clarify. *Who* is following him?’

‘Throne, no...’ Nimeon murmured under his breath. Culmonios closed his eyes, willing it not to be true.

The communications officer was visibly trembling. It took him a moment longer to find the words, in front of a chamber filled with transhuman warriors who believed they had just been betrayed by one of their own.

‘The other shipmasters, my lord. We have seven vessels breaking anchorage formation, running their warp engines hot.’

Sure enough, smaller warning markers flickered into the hololithic display as the designated ships pushed away from their fellows. Nonsensical navigational data stuttered around them before each one disappeared in turn.

‘No!’ Thorcyra roared. He lunged for the communications console, barging the terrified serf out of the way. ‘Who are they? Which ships? I’ll have their commanders’ heads!’

The Space Marines gathered in the viewing tiers shared their Chapter Master’s rage. One, a sergeant from Ninth Company that Culmonios didn’t recognise, cried out from the upper level.

‘He has turned the fleet against us! He means to strand us on Miral!’

Nimeon spun around. ‘Be still, brothers! Would we fall upon one another

so readily when the xenos threaten us once more?’

Some amongst the increasingly agitated throng tried to shout him down, but Culmonios was surprised to find that Nimeon would not be silenced.

‘Regardless of what we might think of Captain Thracian’s command, he is Master of the Fleet and named so by Lord Thorcyra himself. Do you not think that this is simply the most easily rattled of our mortal retainers following the Chapter officer appointed to lead them in a time of crisis? They saw him breaking from the system and assumed that they should also. This it will be, and nothing more.’

Some nodded, others continued to debate the matter. Culmonios leaned in towards Nimeon’s ear as he turned back.

‘A fine tale,’ he whispered, ‘but that doesn’t explain how they could have blindly followed his pre-calculated jump, unless they knew about it in advance. This was planned in secret and the navigational data shared beforehand. Mark my words.’

Before Nimeon could reply, a new hush descended over the chamber. Master Thorcyra slowly, purposefully ascended the worn steps to the viewing tiers.

‘Brothers, to arms,’ he said, his voice a vengeful rumble. ‘For whatever reason, Captain Thracian has seen fit to depart Miral without my leave, taking vessels heavy with refugees but little in the way of Chapter assets. We will not follow him, and we will not retreat, as some have already counselled me since my arrival. This world is our home now, and upon the rocks of the Giant’s Coffin we will break the tyrannid race once and for all. Renew your oaths in defiance of the alien. Take word to your battle-brothers, and to what remains of the fleet above – the Scythes of the Emperor will stand together. We will not be humbled again.’

As far as rousing speeches went, it was met with an oddly subdued reaction. Serf and Scythe alike seemed distracted as they began to file out of the chamber, and indeed Culmonios’ own thoughts were still lingering upon the errant Captain Thracian.

There *had* been a change in him. As for what it might have been, who knew, but this... This was truly astounding.

The gatekeeper, the veteran who had escorted Culmonios into the chamber, stepped in front of him, addressing the Chapter Master as he passed.

‘My lord, Brother Culmonios returns.’

Thorcyra halted on the steps, looking Culmonios up and down, and even sparing a glance for Nimeon. The two warriors stiffened, then bowed their heads.

‘Culmonios,’ he grunted. ‘I have heard much about you, of late.’

Irritation stung at Culmonios. He remembered Nimeon’s earlier comment, and began to wonder precisely what tall tales had been told about him in his absence.

‘I didn’t kill it, my lord.’

The Chapter Master sniffed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The land shark. It wasn’t dead. I just chased it off.’

At that, Thorcyra snorted. A grim smile spread across his face.

Culmonios looked to Nimeon, then back to the Chapter Master. ‘Forgive me, my lord – I fail to see the humour.’

Thorcyra placed a hand on his shoulder guard. ‘I meant, brother, that you are one of the few who successfully completed a scouting mission into the jungle, and recovered your assigned recruitment group. Moreover, you saved the life of a battle-brother by attacking a deadly native predator at close quarters. By my reckoning, in these dark times, that marks you as worthy of a little well-earned renown.’

Culmonios shifted awkwardly. ‘Thank you, my lord, but I could have done no less.’

‘I’m glad to hear it, because I’m putting you in charge of the defences here at the Coffin,’ the Chapter Master said. ‘I’m hoping that heroes will breed heroes, when the battle is joined. We’ll need as many as we can find. Thracian had better have a damned good reason for what just happened, but either way I will want warriors like you at my side when he returns to us, and I hold him to account for his actions.’

Culmonios was speechless. Thorcyra nodded solemnly, and continued on his way to the chamber doors.

‘I’m not too sure about your attire, though,’ he added. ‘We will have to work on that.’



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## RAIN OF FLESH AND BONE

It began as all planetary invasions must, by necessity: in the void.

Viewed at such immense distances, the first tyrannid ship-organisms were comparatively small, spreading like a loose cloud of spores over the Miral star's heliopause. From the earliest confirmed auspex readings, they appeared to have little urgency about them, being rather more like the last exhalation of a drowning man in the ocean depths than a fleet powering towards its target. If the Scythes and their allies had not been expecting them, they might indeed have been overlooked as micro-debris or nonsensical ghost returns on the long-range scanners.

Then, one by one, came the larger vessels. The void beasts. The world killers.

Each alike, but no two the same, they sprawled into the Miral System with glacial implacability. Some were bulbous and tick-like, others sported nests of kilometres-long tentacle arms, and yet others bore gaping maws and birthing channels that kissed the frozen emptiness as they came. The only uniformity of the splinter fleet now known as Miral Rex was in the reddish tinge of their chitinous hulls – a trait that none could deny marked them as belonging to the segmentum-hungry Hive Fleet Kraken.

The majority of Thorcyra's void forces remained high over Miral II,

which by virtue of its orbital cycle was in opposition to the tyranid assault. With the more vulnerable ships guarded by the Chapter's pugilistic strike cruisers – the *Atreides* and the newly restored *Callandra* holding station, while the more heavily armed *Gift of Enyo* prowled the edges of the anchorage – they kept the blaze of the sun between them and the foul xenos invaders. Huddled close around the Militarum outpost, they were ready to move on if the Giant's Coffin should fall. But the eyes of every shipmaster, auspex officer and any crewman who could find reason to be near a viewport were fixed upon the distant darkness, watching as the monstrous Devourer returned to finish what it had begun at Sotha.

Between the first and second planet, to the relative north east of the Miral star, lay the silent, scarred bulk of the flagship, *Honour's Might*. Keeping the rest of the fleet clear of its engagement zone, it would stand alone against the tide. In the absence of any kind of orbital defence grid over Miral Prime, it was the last and only platform from which the Scythes of the Emperor might hope to prevail against the tyranids before they made planetfall, as they most certainly would.

It was confirmed – the hive fleet's advance was converging upon the death world.

More xenos craft swam into view. More, and more still.

They spread and wove, defying the sensorium officers' attempts to track them individually at range. Even the largest hive ships lacked any significant external markings that might be used to easily distinguish them from their kin, or indeed from those that had taken Sotha. A roster of numerical tags, based upon each vessel's unique biometric signature, had been used by the Space Marines in targeting the enemy at the height of that cursed assault, but valuable seconds were always lost in communicating such details to the mortal gunnery officers.

Confusion reigned over the comm. Confusion mixed with a steadily rising panic.

The bastion's signal officer hailed his masters, consulting his data-slate as he came.

'I have Shipmaster Jerrum of the *Lamentarion*, and Alei-Wei of the *Calixtus*, my lords. Both say they are unable to provide triangulation support for the larger fleet vessels as requested.'

Thorcyra squared his jaw. 'What is the problem? Their systems were

upgraded specially.’

‘Their sensors are optimal. Their crews simply cannot distinguish one contact from the next without manually cross-checking the index roster every time.’

The Chapter Master sighed pointedly, his brow knotting. ‘They assured us. They sought our favour. Now they show their true lack of quality, when the moment is almost upon us.’ He looked to Culmonios. ‘Any thoughts? Should I have them sanctioned for this failing?’

‘They lack our eidetic memories, my lord,’ he replied. ‘They were not made for this as we were. They will never be our match. It is not necessarily a failing, though that understanding is of little use to us, here and now.’

The armoured warriors stood and watched as the roster refreshed, and refreshed again.

It was old Sergeant Brimelow who provided the solution that they sought.

‘Name them.’ He stared thoughtfully at the growing list of tags that dated all the way back to the Chapter’s first contact with the Kraken, as it scrolled over the bastion’s comm-net screens. ‘Give each ship an identity, a character that the human serfs can follow and comprehend more easily than a string of unconnected digits.’

It was simple, and elegant. Culmonios looked to Master Thorcyra, who nodded before giving the order to his attendants. ‘Name them. From the largest hive ship to the smallest drone-cur – let us know the enemy on our own terms, and name them for the monsters they are.’

Confirmation was returned. The list was refreshed, over and over.

Twenty. Fifty. Two hundred. Six hundred.

The roster grew further still, filled with all the grand and terrible names of Sotharan myth. *Aemos. Archelon. Axolomes. Bariusz. Borno. Conawen. Cuimon. Daedalus. Dantioch. Dolke. Dygebe. Dymath...*

Each was a nightmare given form, a cultural fear of the old gods and beasts that had lived upon the mountains, or beneath them, before the coming of the Imperium. Was it wise to christen the Great Devourer with such potent appellations? Few amongst the fleet seemed to care – rather than an invitation to calamity, they instead found a focus for their hatred. It was no longer merely the tyranids that they faced, but all the ancient devils of their home worlds.

That familiarity, and even the horror that went along with it, appeared to renew their strength. As such, Culmonios supposed, it could only be a blessing.

Acknowledgements came back from the flagship, and from the other battle-ready vessels at Miral II. The information was being communicated across the fleet. A new measure of the foe was being taken, and the archives updated. There were nine of the greater vessels, the hive ships, present in the splinter. It was less than half the number that had taken Sotha, though the Chapter's strength had been much reduced since then.

A little under fourteen hours later, as night fell over the Giant's Coffin, the first of the xenos abominations came within weapons range of the *Honour's Might*.

By the updated roster, it was designated as #70443 *Heloth*. Its slab-hull was a vast clenched knuckle of organic diamond, studded all about with tubular protrusions – great bio-cannons that drooled frozen acid into the void in anticipation of its prey. It appeared young and brash, pushing ahead of its kin like a bull, eager to charge.

At Thorcyra's command, Shipmaster Mardelech brought the battle-barge around. Its engines burning hot, it matched the tyranid behemoth in length if not in tonnage, and had the advantage of far greater manoeuvrability. Nevertheless, the flagship was forced to plough through the miasma of lesser bio-ships that surrounded *Heloth*, and they exacted a heavy toll.

Swooping blade-vessels fluttered like carrion bats along both flanks, cleaving through sensor vanes or gouging the already weakened armour of the batteries with each pass. Other, smaller craft like living torpedoes plunged towards the hull, though most often they burst against the battle-barge's void shields in a riot of geometric colour. Organic detritus soon filled the ever-decreasing space between the two sparring vessels, causing the Scythes' depleted wings of combat interceptor fighters to break off time and again in search of safer trajectories.

The fighters had only one purpose in this gambit – to clear the smaller enemy craft from the engagement zone, allowing the *Honour's Might* as clear a field of fire as possible. As it was, it was like trying to sweep back a pond with a broomstick.

But when the battle-barge's guns spoke, they spoke with all the thunder of

the Emperor's divine wrath.

The bombardment cannons, capable of laying waste to entire cities on the ground, cleaved through *Heloth's* outer shell, spilling tranches of softer matter and rolling the hive ship slowly to starboard. It fired its bio-weapons futilely, landing as many hits upon its own kin as it did the Imperial craft. With its headlong charge towards Miral Prime thrown askew, it convulsed and clawed at the void with alarming agility for such a vast creature, but even that could not arrest its floundering turn before the *Honour's Might* closed.

Ramming smaller brood-vessels aside with its keen, bladed prow, the flagship's helmsmen steered a deadly arc within fifteen hundred metres of *Heloth's* exposed port side. Proximity alarms howled on every deck. Debris clattered against the battle-barge's liveried hull.

Then her gunnery stations opened up a full broadside, at near-point-blank range.

Thousands of tonnes of ordnance opened up the hive ship's flank and spined belly. Foul, cartilaginous material blossomed into the void, only to be blown into ever smaller pieces by the sustained volley. The battle-barge drove on, its void shields licking against the broken shell and the heat of its engines pushing the stricken beast further away as they passed. Eruptions of bio-acid and other less wholesome fluids spoke of catastrophic internal damage, and the dying hulk began to quake as it spiralled into the embrace of Miral Prime's upper atmosphere.

Mardelech's voice came, clear and jubilant. '*Target seven-zero-four-four-three Heloth is neutralised! Repeat, Heloth is neutralised!*'

Cheers went up across the comm-net, from the distant fleet to the caverns beneath the Giant's Coffin. First blood had gone to the Scythes of the Emperor. The Kraken would indeed reap the whirlwind for daring to defile noble Sotha.

The shipmaster's lieutenants recalled their fighter wings, instead increasing the rate of fire from the flagship's gun batteries to cleanse the engagement zone. Heaving to, the *Honour's Might* turned to face the rest of the approaching splinter fleet – to all who were watching the battle unfold, it was clear that old Mardelech, full of bravado, was issuing a challenge to the xenos. In the graceful sweep of the battle-barge's turn, and in the blustering gun-salutes that he ordered, every facet of the battered

old flagship's manner demanded to know, in its display of martial strength, *Who will be next?*

Too late, Mardelech realised what his hubris had wrought. His tactical officers sounded the alarm, which was quickly taken up by the Scythes stationed at the Coffin.

*Heloth* was blazing a fiery trail across the skies of Miral Prime. The blackening carcass fractured as it fell, becoming a shower of falling stars over the terminator and into the planet's night side. As it pierced the cloud cover, the flames softened into a diffuse glow. It was the false dawn of an impending cataclysm.

Permissions to engage from orbit, to blast it with further cannon fire and plasma torpedoes, were denied – Master Thorcyra would not risk turning one dangerous incoming object into many more. Instead, reconnaissance craft were scrambled from the surface, tasked with tracking the remains of the falling hive ship down to its inevitable impact point. Though this was only the first engagement of the void-battle to come, they would mark and contain the crash site as best they could.

And, like as not, the behemoth was far from truly dead.

The wake-shot brought Brother Keltru around in a splintering second. His eyes snapped open and he heaved a deep, reflexive breath into all three of his lungs before settling to a series of choking coughs.

Machaon's human attendant stepped forwards with a beaker of water, which Keltru downed in one gulp. Amidst the bustle of the medicae ward, he propped himself up on the slab, rubbing absently at the reddened needle punctures on his wrists.

'Ugh,' he grumbled, staring down at the sterile-wrapped stumps of his legs. 'I thought I might have only dreamed that. No such luck.'

The Apothecary pursed his lips, checking the dressings one last time. 'I'm sorry to disappoint you, brother. I did what I could, but in the end we had to cut back even more of the left leg, to bring it in line with the right.' He nodded to the adept clutching the empty beaker. She still shuffled nervously before their patient, and would not raise her eyes from the chamber floor. 'It was Maderie's idea, actually, and a good one at that. In the long term, it will equalise the muscle load and lessen the difference between your limbs when it comes to rehabilitation, once we can graft

replacements.’

Keltru ran his tongue over his teeth. ‘You mean, you can’t yet?’

‘No, not presently. I don’t have the resources to hand for augmetic fitting.’

‘I’ll take simple bionics, then. I’m not proud. As long as I can stand, walk and fight...’ He trailed off, smiling grimly. ‘Although, if you can at least overclock the fibre bundles, I think a little extra speed would suit me. Given recent events.’

Machaon couldn’t find it in himself to join in with his brother’s poor humour.

‘You misunderstand me, Keltru. I don’t have any legs at all to give you. We don’t have any of the necessary materials down here on Miral to fabricate them, either.’

‘So, what? I’m to drag myself around the floor of the training cages until—’

The crippled warrior’s eyes moved to the space beyond the observation windows. Crimson beacon lights spun silently there in the gloom, strobing the hewn walls of the Coffin with the colour of blood.

‘Are we at combat alert?’

Machaon helped him up to an awkward sitting position at the edge of the slab. ‘Yes, brother. The xenos are attacking the system. One of their hive ships was shot down from orbit in the last few hours, so they may already have some advance organisms out there in the jungle. If any of them survived the crash, that is.’

Keltru gritted his teeth. ‘I wonder how long *they’ll* last against the local fauna...’ he muttered. Then he scratched at the back of his scalp, clearly agitated. He measured his words, speaking calmly but firmly. ‘Just to be clear, just so I know we’re of the same mind – you don’t actually expect me to sit here on these stumps while my brothers take up arms against the Kraken, do you?’

‘We most certainly do not,’ Machaon replied. ‘You’ve been patched up as best we can, to return you to some semblance of battle-readiness. All your surgeries were added to the priority list on the express orders of Chapter Master Thorcyra and Bastion Commander Culmonios.’

Poor Keltru blinked once. Twice. He swallowed, then blinked again.

‘I’m sure you’ll understand, Brother-Apothecary, there’s a lot in that

statement for me to take in. Give me a moment. I'll be with you again in a moment.'

'Of course.'

A startled shriek came from the next chamber, followed by a glassy crash and some bitter cursing. Machaon moved quickly to the doorway, keeping Maderie behind him, to see one of the male medicae staff edging away from his dropped instrument tray, and the unwashed savage crouched behind the nearest gurney.

'You again!' the Apothecary shouted, grabbing the Mirali boy by his shoulder. 'How do you even get in here? You're like a damned tunnel rat.'

Maderie scampered away, holding her surgical wrap-mask tightly over her mouth and nose as Machaon hauled the struggling youth back to the foot of Keltru's slab. The boy left dirty, bare footprints on the scrubbed tiles of the apothecarion.

'You've got a visitor, brother,' sighed Machaon. 'This one wouldn't leave you alone, right from the moment you first came through those doors. I've given up trying to keep him out.'

Recognition flickered across Keltru's face. 'Hwygir...' he murmured. 'You little coward. Felt bad for leaving us behind, then?'

Hwygir squirmed free of Machaon's grip, straightening up and beaming toothily. 'You are look very crazy, Giant-Keltru,' he said. 'You have no legs.'

'Thank you for the reminder.'

Machaon cuffed the runt around the back of the head, eliciting a squawk that was more pantomime than pain, and shoved him towards Keltru. 'The rest of the aspirants have been processed. Culmonios is keeping them away from the defensive lines until their first stage implantations are certified, although their tribal kin are being urged to patrol the outlying mesas for any sign of the xenos.' He hushed his voice a little. 'They're marked as expendable, where these aspirants are not.'

Keltru rolled his eyes. 'Yes, yes. They are the future of the Chapter, and so forth.' He glared at Hwygir, who was curiously prodding at the sterile dressings with a single, grimy finger. 'And this little trog could be my battle-brother one day, whether I like it or not...'

The Apothecary nodded, following the thought through.

'Forgive the informality of the occasion,' he said, 'but I took the

opportunity to harvest your secondary progenoid while you were under. We are building on the Chapter's limited stocks to capitalise on the renewed recruitment – yours are well past maturity, according to the archive. I'm still not sure why, but Chief Apothecary Vedio appears to have postponed an unusual number of non-essential gene-seed extraction surgeries in the past decade. It seems prudent, now, to level the tally.'

'You mean, because I might never leave this rock.'

'Many of us won't.'

Keltru grinned once more. 'You'll be fine. You can still run away on your own two feet, if you need to.'

This time, Machaon did laugh. Hwylgir looked from the Apothecary to Keltru, as if seeking approval, and then he laughed too.

'You've been assigned to the bastion command, with all haste, brother,' said Machaon, reaching for his comm-link. 'I've spoken to the armoury serfs, and they're fitting out a tracked perambulator unit for you. I'd advise you to take the conveyer up there, and avoid the stairs for now.'

Easing himself forwards with Hwylgir's help, Keltru took Machaon's forearm.

'Fine. But you still owe me legs, once this is all over. My battle-brothers won't be so kind if I can't stand eye to eye with them again.'

Recollection flickered in Machaon's mind. *Battle-brothers*.

'There was something I wanted to ask you, actually,' he said. 'According to your honour roll, you served under Scout Sergeant Rezyk, in the Tenth Company?'

Keltru frowned. 'Squad Rezyk, aye. My first posting.'

'Well then, do you happen to know a Brother Hadrios?'

On the hololith display, the remains of *Heloth* were a smear of red over the topographical grid. Culmonios moved around the table, leaning in to get a better view, trying to make an assessment as though he had eyes on the target area itself. He pushed past those members of Thorcyra's honour guard who were gathered at the hololith's edge.

The Chapter Master watched him from the command lectern.

'You have an unconventional approach, brother,' he said.

Culmonios looked up. 'I wouldn't know about that, my lord. I do as I've always done, as I was taught by Sergeant Ionic and others before him. I

find it easier to imagine myself on the ground, rather than looking down on it all.'

'So I see. You play to your own strengths, and you seem to care little for tradition or protocol.'

'Apologies, lord.'

Thorcyra came around the lectern, gripping the rail with one hand. 'I would not have you apologise, brother. It is to honest, experienced warriors such as yourself that I turn now, as we rebuild the Chapter.' He cast his eyes over the grid. 'I see greatness in your future, or else I would not entrust a portion of the defence of Miral Prime to your expertise. While Mardelech and his worthy crew move to continue the void-war, you and I shall contain and repel any invaders that might reach the surface.'

Before Culmonios could answer, the vox-link chimed.

*'This is Agaitas, reporting from Heloth crash site.'*

Culmonios rose, and took the master-vox from a robed human adept. 'Captain – this is the Coffin, acknowledging. What do you see?'

As the auspex readings from Second Company came back over the comm, refining and clarifying, the red hololithic smear began to extend into three dimensions, bulking upwards and fracturing into a handful of smaller returns. In response, the green swell of the jungle map receded dramatically.

*'Confirmed, Coffin. First bio-wreckage logged at just over seventy-six kilometres from the eastern mesa outposts. I have three squads moving around to the far side, but it's going to be hard to get much closer...'*

The serf comm-operators coaxed a pair of crackling helmet feeds up onto the main display, from the warriors under Agaitas' command. Thorcyra cursed under his breath, but Culmonios found that he had no words for the sight that greeted him.

The jungle was burning, as far as the eye could see. The xenos hulk *Heloth* had torn a great rift in the surface of the world with its descent, some fifty kilometres long. It lay now, broken and half-buried, with its charred innards just visible through the inferno that surrounded it, opened up like a shattered hand clawing at the dawn sky.

The chamber was silent, except for the hiss of the open vox-channel.

*'Coffin, stand by. My advance teams report enemy movement.'*

Culmonios spun to the hololith. Sure enough, fresh contacts moved

amidst the wreckage of the hive ship. He switched channels on the vox. ‘Recon wings, I need a high-altitude pass over *Heloth*. Full tactical scanner sweep.’

Confirmation came back, estimating sixty seconds to contact, but Culmonios found that he could not take his eyes from the hololithic sensor blips.

He called up to Master Thorcyra, who was still transfixed by the feed images.

‘My lord, we should order First Company to stand down from their transports. We cannot afford to have them mount a combat insertion into that wreck. We must fortify the Giant’s Coffin.’

One of the honour guard stepped forwards. ‘All squads are already cleared to leave the bastion. Those assigned to the aerial transports have already left, in fact.’

Culmonios watched the slowly spreading blips.

‘Recall them,’ he ordered. ‘Now.’

Thorcyra came to his side. ‘Do as he says.’

The stern voice of Captain Agaitas cut in over the vox. ‘*Recon wing sighted, fifteen seconds to target.*’

Relayed feeds from the reconnaissance gunships replaced those from the ground. As they swept in over the burning jungle, thick palls of black smoke began to obscure the displayed view. Even so, the silhouette of the downed hive ship was visible against the raging flames.

The hulk was moving. Or, at least, something was moving within it.

Or many lesser *somethings*...

Master Thorcyra magnified the image, revealing great, bladed forelimbs carving out through the burned meat of the hull. Grand and terrible, colossal beasts that were neither entirely hunched scorpion nor horned spider heaved themselves free of their lifeless parent-vessel, howling the pain of their birth to the heavens. Countless others, their less fortunate kin, had not survived the impact; their chewed remains were left as nothing more than fodder for the smaller tyrannids that followed in their wake. The whole scene was rendered in the mute, detached perspective of a visual feed at extreme range.

Culmonios brought the master-vox back to his lips. ‘Captain Agaitas, withdraw your forces now! Fall back to your transports and prepare for

aerial strike!’

*‘Coffin, please confirm. I have no visual on enemy forces.’*

*‘They’re titan-forms! Bio-titans! Fall back now!’*

The hololith lit up with fresh threat icons just as the feed became a mass of flared weapons fire, down amidst the haze of smoke and flames. Sprays of incandescent bio-plasma and other alien projectiles consumed swathes of what little jungle remained.

The vox-adept spoke up, with a trembling voice. ‘My lords, we’ve lost Captain Agaitas’ signal. Second Company is reporting squad-level engagements breaking out across the area.’

Culmonios looked to Master Thorcyra, his weary face underlit by the red glower of the hololith.

‘This is only the first of nine hive ships in the splinter fleet,’ he said grimly, ‘and we are already taking losses. I would urge you to reconsider a full evacuation, before it’s too late.’

Thorcyra gritted his teeth. ‘I will not surrender the Giant’s Coffin. By your command, we have the Terminators and veteran squads of First Company returning to the bastion even now, instead of striking at these already crippled xenos bastards.’

He took up his helm from an armourer-serf, and pulled it over his head with a snap-hiss of internal pressurisation. It was a stylised iron skull, the mask worn by every Warden of the Pharos since the Chapter’s founding – the death’s head, the reaper’s grin. Seeing this relic donned now for battle, Thorcyra’s honour guard readied their power-scythes and took their places at his side. His voice became an augmitter’s filtered growl.

‘We will not abandon Miral, nor the legacy of Sotha that we hold in trust. With our noble mortal allies, the Scythes of the Emperor will stand as one against any void-spawned abominations that the tyranids deign to throw at us.’ He peered at Culmonios through the crimson lenses of his helm. ‘And above all else, brother, I need you with me upon the walls. Take up your shield, and let us take the measure of the vile Kraken, together.’

It was an offer that Culmonios found he could not refuse.



# CHAPTER EIGHT

## HONOUR'S DEATH

The sky over the Coffin was lit by dull flashes. It was not the strobe of death world lightning amidst the growing thunderheads that preceded almost every dawn, but weapons fire from the battle still raging in the void above.

The *Honour's Might* had pulled away from near orbit, the chastened shipmaster having learned the lesson of *Heloth's* plunge, and speared a second hive ship before it could approach Miral Prime. This new beast was slower, more ponderous, and it had shrugged off the kind of cannon-fire trauma that had holed its cousin to the vacuum. Nonetheless, even as it disgorged swarms of smaller ship-creatures and mycetic spores, the battle-barge pounded at it, over and over, with every weapon that the gunnery officers could bring to bear. Like a carcass hauled over the butcher's slab, the xenos leviathan was blasted apart by the sheer weight of fire, and its void-brood fell into disarray.

Again, the great battle-barge had rolled away from its headlong charge. Mardelech intended to be more diligent, this time, in mopping up the dregs – he was aware that his every deed would form part of the Chapter's history, for good or ill. They were, all of them, writing the legend of the Giant's Coffin with their actions, and he had informed his crew in no

uncertain terms that he'd be damned if his own portion of the tale would be allowed to end in defeat.

Ironic, it was, that this was when the tyranids seemed also to begin to learn from their previous follies.

With the flagship mired in combat, it was Culmonios' auspex operators at the bastion who noticed it first: the remaining hive ships were dividing their strength. Four of them – the fastest, by the look of it – spread out to engage the *Honour's Might* as one. The remaining three, the largest and certainly the most ravenous, fell into a far longer and more sinister heading.

They had scented prey in the fleet anchored at Miral II.

Striding at Thorcyra's side along the bare passageway that led to the upper ramparts, Culmonios listened as the Chapter Master gave his orders over the comm.

'Signal the *Atreides* to break picket and reinforce the flagship. Our strike cruisers vastly outpace the xenos vessels in the deep void, but the hive ships on course for Miral Prime are less than three hours from attack range. Break two of them before they arrive, and we'll deal with the rest of these vermin on the ground.'

Though he kept it to himself, Culmonios knew that the numbers did not add up. Any one hive ship would be enough to overwhelm the local human defenders and devour an entire world within weeks, and yet Thorcyra spoke of *four* as though they were already as good as destroyed and the day won.

There was no way that this would become the glorious legend that Shipmaster Mardelech imagined. It would be a joyless grind at best.

And indeed, he guessed, at worst.

Before them, the armoured doors to the battlements opened and all such thoughts fell from his mind in an instant. As the honour guard strode out into that new and terrible dawn, Culmonios no longer saw the enemy through the abstraction of a hololith or pict-feed, but with his own two eyes.

On the horizon, a trio of bio-titans towered above the jungle canopy on long, spined legs, almost silhouetted against the roiling column of smoke that seemed to foul the whole sky. They stalked onwards, howling abominable cries and smashing the trees all to kindling, their great weapon

analogues spitting torrents of destruction as they came. Their attention was fixed upon the ground before them, and Culmonios realised that they were driving the survivors of Second Company back to the Giant's Coffin, with tooth and claw and fearsome bio-plasma. Native carrion birds circled and swooped around the monsters, unaware that once this banquet of death was over then they would likely be next.

Culmonios gritted his teeth in pure, unreserved hatred, and opened a vox-channel. 'Approaching Chapter forces, this is the Coffin. Report your status. Who leads Second Company?'

The link crackled. Master Thorcyra glanced at him, his eyes wide behind the lenses of his iron mask. The other Scythes on the battlements took in the battle as it unfolded in the distance, cursing and naming the xenos for the bastard-get that they were. Down below, upon the mesa itself, the Astra Militarum artillery crews looked on with all-too-human dread in their eyes.

'Approaching Chapter forces,' Culmonios repeated, 'report now. Tell us how to help you.'

A burst of filtered, alien shrieking cut through the vox, punctuated with the bark of bolter fire. The voice that answered him was unfamiliar, and ragged with exhaustion.

*'Coffin, we're surrounded. The titans took out our air support, and chewed through the column in less than an hour. The jungle is already swarming with tyranid hatchlings from the Heloth wreck.'*

'How many of you remain? Can you make it to the outer walls?'

There was another pause, the sounds of distant battle unabating.

*'Unlikely. We're down to— Pull back! Pull back, brothers! We're down to less than two squads. They hit us hard. The captain is gone, although we're rallied to the company standard. I don't think we're going anywhere, Coffin.'*

Culmonios turned to see the Chapter banner still hanging proudly at his back, the noble Sothan horseman now bearing witness to the unthinkable: a second invasion by the Kraken. Then he looked to Thorcyra for approval of what they both knew had to be done.

The Chapter Master nodded, albeit with a clear and reluctant sorrow.

Culmonios spoke again. 'Second Company. Hold position.'

*'Understood. For Sotha, brother.'*

‘Aye. For Sotha.’

Moving to the edge of the battlements, Culmonios gripped the crenellated wall and bellowed down to the human gun crews.

‘Give me range on those horrors, you slack-jawed simpletons! Bring them down! Make my brothers’ deaths count for something!’

No warrior of the Chapter cheered or roared in defiance as the Imperial guns opened up. Not one of them dared even speak of the likely slaughter of Agaitas’ company, or attempt to justify it as a necessary sacrifice in order to drive the xenos back from sight of the Giant’s Coffin. After all that the Scythes of the Emperor had endured, this new loss left an even duller ache in their grieving souls.

As the horizon of Miral Prime was consumed by the guns’ barrage, the nearest of the bio-titans whirled around in anger as direct hits struck its armoured shoulders, its powerful forelimbs staggering beneath the force of the detonations. Another was slain instantly, decapitated, its body toppling into the unfolding firestorm.

The third made to bolt for safety, perhaps galloping for the distant reaches of the jungle where it might rally and try its hand again, but it crashed blindly into the first of its kin before it had taken even two steps. They sprawled together in the blaze, thrashing at the burning vegetation and the agony of each new ordnance impact like scorpions thrown into a campfire.

A long, broken alien limb blasted free, spinning slowly end over end against the fiery skyline before crashing down out of sight. It was easily the length of the largest Chapter gunship.

Culmonios spat in disgust. He waited ten heartbeats, then opened the vox-channel again.

‘Second Company. Report status.’

Nothing but the quiet hiss of static came back, almost inaudible beneath the thunder of the emplaced guns, and Culmonios knew with a grim certainty that this loss would not be the last that the Chapter would suffer.

The rough-hewn walls of the passageway trembled, loose debris pattering to the rocky floor. Apothecary Machaon’s hurried steps faltered, and he steadied himself. Hanging from simple cleats hammered into the ceiling, the lumens blinked out, plunging him into darkness as the rumble of

artillery fire grew louder.

True darkness. The cloying, impenetrable darkness that could only be experienced underground. His transhuman eyes adjusted as best they could.

*The darkness of the grave, inside the Coffin,* he thought.

From further along the passageway, he heard the whimpering cries of human serfs as they cowered together. Machaon edged forwards, feeling the way with his outstretched hand.

‘Have no fear, honoured servants,’ he called out over the rising din. ‘I am with you.’

Then, just when he was certain that the very foundations of the mesa would shake themselves apart, the tremors began to subside. The lights flickered back on, casting fitful shadows before reaching full burn once more.

Machaon turned the corner to find two medicae adepts and a young-faced security officer crouched in a dark recess, dropped papers scattered around them and the stink of their mortal fear heavy in the air. The Apothecary regarded them for a moment, then reached for the officer’s dropped lascarbine.

‘On your feet, lad,’ Machaon said gently, handing the weapon back to him.

Throne. This one was practically a child.

As the sniffling youth darted away in the direction of the command centre, Machaon helped the two quaking adepts to their feet. ‘Come, quickly. The guns of our allies strike back at the xenos horrors. The bastion is well defended, though we will soon need to prepare the upper chambers to receive any wounded brothers from Captain Agaitas’ company.’

He thumbed the comm-link at his wrist, but all the channels were garbled or dead, this far below ground.

‘And plenty more wounded there will be, in the days ahead, if I know anything about our foe,’ he added.

Ushering them down through the hardpoint bulkhead doors and into the cryo-vaults, he found more serfs who had already been in the process of preparing triage gurneys before the lights went out. He encouraged them, praising their diligence and directing their efforts as he worked at their

side. The task was useful, he knew – not only in the organisation of the defence as tasked by Master Thorcyra and Bastion Commander Culmonios, but also to keep the serfs' hands and minds occupied.

It would be all too easy for panic to set in. They all knew what was coming.

Best to focus their attention on something else.

He realised, then, that he was also trying to distract himself.

Tearing open a sterilised container of pain-balm ampoules, Machaon let his eyes fall to the makeshift gene- seed repository that they had established only days earlier. Frost rimed the walls of the chamber around the brushed plasteel casings, green lights blinking in the cold vapour that hung low to the floor in the snaking mass of power cables and thermal drain conduits.

The chamber doors opened, and he heard the heavy tread of armoured boots entering the chamber behind him, stealing him away from his grim thoughts. He turned to see the last person that he would have expected, in this place, now.

He bowed his head. 'Chief Librarian.'

Spiridonas was fully armoured, his pauldron bearing the freshly engraved sigil of the Master of the Librarius, though he still leaned upon his staff as if for support. Machaon noted with some concern the paleness of the psyker's careworn features, and the shadows that ringed his eyes. He could not keep that concern from his voice.

'My lord Spiridonas, should you be exerting yourself so? You do not yet seem ready to wear war-plate again, much less take to the field of battle.'

The Librarian smoothed his surcoat as he drew nearer, then held his gauntleted hand out before him, regarding it with those tired eyes. 'I do not yet feel ready to take up the mantle of Lord Tormal's office either, Brother-Apothecary, but needs must. Our glorious Chapter Master has decreed it so.'

For a moment Machaon almost replied with something less than complimentary, but thought the better of it.

Moving between the frantic medicae adepts, Spiridonas drew up next to him. He planted his staff into the gritty floor and gazed at the gene-seed containers with a kind of reverential sorrow.

'Nonetheless,' the Librarian continued, 'I wanted to thank you.'

‘Thank me for what? There was nothing I could do to ease your pain, brother. Not really.’

‘No, but you have always tried to keep the shadows at bay. You deserve to know that you have my gratitude for that, at least.’

Machaon frowned. ‘I don’t understand. What did I do, other than put you out cold on the deck?’

Spiridonas was silent for a long while before he replied. When he finally did, his voice was barely a whisper. ‘It is nothing. Forgive me.’

Then the Librarian turned to leave, his staff held in both hands – no longer a crutch, but a weapon once more. ‘Farewell, Brother Machaon. Guard this chamber well. I do not think that we will see each other again, before the end.’

The heavy doors closed, but Spiridonas’ words had set a chill in the Apothecary that he knew was nothing to do with the ambient temperature of the cryo-vault.

Petrochem fumes fouled the morning air as the mobile armour divisions moved beyond the bastion gates. Taking up position on the mesa top, they formed a cordon in front of the Aegis lines and auto-turrets, with the three more heavily armed Predator tanks emplaced to the fore. Their main guns had been refitted by the Techmarine cadres to provide greater anti-infantry support, rather than armour-piercing – autocannons and heavy bolters were primed and sanctified, their ammunition hoppers and belt feeds checked thrice over for any hint of malignancy of spirit that might cause a jam at a critical moment.

The Scythes knew, better than most, that sheer weight of fire was the only way to stall a full tyranid brood-charge.

The advance of the bio-titans had been halted. Only the corpses of the great beasts were visible on the blasted horizon, but sensor sweeps and aerial sorties showed that the jungle crawled with smaller, untraceable contacts for a dozen kilometres in every direction around the *Heloth* wreck. Preparations made now would pay for themselves ten times over when the enemy reached the gates of the Giant’s Coffin.

Behind the dug-in Predators, in interlocking and alternating gunnery arcs, was a handful of standard company-level armoured personnel carriers, both Rhinos and auxiliary Razorbacks. Deployed in a defensive capacity, it

was unlikely that the Chapter's line squads would have need of transportation. By Culmonios' reckoning, the entire focus of the conflict would be contained within a seven hundred metre-square *zone mortalis*. They would remain here in victory, or they would die.

Some amongst First Company had urged him to reconsider. Place the Rhinos as a sacrificial asset, they argued, well beyond the mesa approaches. Let the xenos overrun them and their lighter, cupola-mounted bolters, wearying themselves before they broke into the teeth of the Predators' vengeance, out in the open.

Clearly, these learned warriors had not found time to study the tactical logs from the fall of Sotha. The tyranids did not weary easily.

Culmonios had reasoned that while the vehicles themselves were expendable, their crews were not. Each brother Scythe was now invaluable to the Chapter, regardless of his prior specialisation or battlefield role, and none would be committed to any such forlorn hope. The armoured carriers with their empty holds would remain to support the battle tanks for as long as possible. If, when, the Predators' reinforced but immobile positions became untenable, the gunners would abandon them for more rapid evacuation in the waiting Rhinos, pulling back into the bastion's defensive lines and sallying through the ramparts to take up fresh arms upon the battlements.

Higher ground. When the low ground was lost, always pull back to the high.

Master Thorcyra had approved. It was decided, and no further objection would be brooked.

Within the enclosure of the bastion, the Chapter's two surviving Whirlwind artillery tanks were set behind the main gates. Brother Culmonios noted the serf-adepts running cables down into the open top hatch of the closest machine, as a fully servo-harnessed Techmarine attended the mobile tactical suite unloaded beside it.

Culmonios turned to Brimelow as they passed. 'What's this? I thought they were reported as battle-ready?'

The Scout sergeant shrugged. 'I have no idea. New ballistic programming, maybe, to aid the gunners. Forge Master Sebastian sent down all of his recorded data from the Sothan invasion, so we could analyse the holes in our strategy, figure out what to do better against this

foe in future.’ He nodded to the gates. ‘Once they close up, the Whirlwinds will be firing mostly indirectly, over the walls.’

‘Until the xenos breach the outer line.’

Brimelow looked at Culmonios curiously, yet it did not seem that he disagreed.

‘Until then,’ he replied. ‘And if the gates are opened again, the missile racks will likely run dry in a matter of minutes...’

The sky above them paled, casting second shadows at odds with the sun’s own light, still rising in the east. The two Space Marines looked to the heavens to see a blossoming detonation in the upper reaches of Miral Prime’s atmosphere, quickening their stride reflexively in spite of the eerie lack of sound that came with it. Every pair of eyes, human serf and transhuman warrior alike, joined them from every rampart of the bastion. The attention of all was fixed upon that awesome sight – the concerted firepower of the *Honour’s Might* and the *Atreides* turned upon another of the monstrous tyrannid vessels.

‘The flagship is giving them the fight of their wretched lives,’ Brimelow murmured. ‘I’ve never seen the like, not even at Sotha. Mardelech won’t let the xenos slip past him again.’

Culmonios was not so sure, but nodded regardless. ‘Then let’s make the most of the time he has bought us.’

Warriors from Fourth Company recognised him as their former battle-brother as they passed, and saluted him fervently. ‘We are with you, commander!’ one of them called out. Culmonios recalled his name: Tiresias, one of Sergeant Angeloi’s ragtag squad only recently returned from the apothecarion after being mauled at Sotha.

‘Fight hard, brothers,’ he replied, though in truth he was already tired of repeating those words every few minutes. He drew the tactical log slate from his belt and called up an annotated map of the mesa. Brimelow’s neophyte Scout squads were highlighted in green, against the deeper shade of the jungle. ‘Do you have everything you need, sergeant?’

‘We have cleared the armoury of cluster mines and trip-flares,’ the older officer replied. ‘So unless they’re hiding any more pallets that I don’t know about, “everything we need” and “all that we have” are far from the same thing.’

They reached the outer gates, and Brimelow had to raise his voice over

the growl of tank engines.

‘I’ve got the lads working in teams of three, rigging up to twenty metres past the treeline, beyond the cleared ground. We found nine spools of razor wire too, and one of the Mirali recruits has some idea about creating infantry funnel zones with that and... well, sharpened stakes, basically. It’s primitive, but it can’t hurt to let him try. Worst-case scenario, it does nothing. Best-case? It channels the xenos into the mined areas.’ He gave a tired grin. ‘When the first of those creatures hits the line, we will hear it all the way up to the top of the bastion. Trust me on that.’

Culmonios looked to where two depleted squadrons of Scout bikers were carefully loading the last of the explosives onto their mounts. One last bike stood ready for Brimelow. The sergeant followed his gaze, then drew up to attention before him.

‘Where will you want us when we’re finished, commander? Expeditions into the jungle will be trickier after the traps are laid, is all. We can return to the bastion, or run mounted patrols around the foot of the mesa, if you have nothing else in mind.’

Replacing the slate, Culmonios gave the reaper’s salute. ‘Have your Scouts dig in, sergeant. Conceal your mounts in the lower caves, and take position on the rocks. I’ll want a good tally of kills from your snipers, enough to put even Sergeant Angeloi to shame, in his early days.’

Brimelow laughed as he returned the salute. ‘Ah, young Marek. He could hit a bolt shell with another bolt shell from a hundred paces, back when you were all coming up together. Shame he could never keep his bloody opinions to himself, otherwise I’m sure he would have been a captain by now.’

The sergeant regarded Culmonios for a moment.

‘You have done well, though,’ he continued. ‘All my lads do well in the end, those that live long enough. I know you all think me so cold and calculating, but that’s called *experience*. It seems you’re learning to appreciate it too. Commander.’

Culmonios found it hard to know how to take the sergeant’s words. He felt his own hatred of the xenos broiling just beneath the calm façade, and the thirst for vengeance that came along with it. His bone trophies rattled against his pauldrons as he moved. ‘We’re all veterans now. The Kraken saw to that. Fight hard, sergeant. For Sotha.’

Brimelow nodded and turned away. Before he had gone more than ten paces, the sky lightened once more, halting him in his tracks.

This time, a deep rumble built in the heavens, beyond the clouds. Culmonios could feel it in his chest as he shielded his eyes from the glowing glare.

As the rolling firework-barrage of atmospheric reports struggled to take a singular form, the light was tinged with the purple of bio-plasma.

It was the *Atreides* that faltered, and not the flagship.

The strike cruiser, supported by a flight of Thunderhawk gunships, strafed #37729 *Jaduli* with her bombardment cannon in a full-burn pass, the magma warheads tearing chunks from the hive ship's exposed flank. Agonised, *Jaduli* lashed back with spore pods and flares from its foul ordnance analogues, clouds of swarm-vessels buzzing madly in the space between them.

As the *Atreides* rolled to take the return fire on the strongest vector of her void shields, a dark prowler of a tyranid ship – easily the size of an Imperial cruiser itself – collided with her starboard ram.

Battery magazines cooked off, gouting flame into the void. Hundreds of crew were slain in an instant.

The strike cruiser's trajectory was thrown to one side. She began to slew, exposing her vulnerable belly to the foe even as the helmsmen fought to bring her back into line. Sensing weakness, two more hive ships moved in for the kill.

At this sight, Shipmaster Mardelech shrieked his defiance across the vox, urging his engineers to divert more power to the main engines.

The *Honour's Might* opened up with all forward guns. The void lit up with unimaginable destruction, the fleshy abomination #16861 *Omerta* taking the full force of the assault. Its rippling pallium fins spasmed in the vacuum, contorting the vast body as its grotesque, single eye burst. The hive ship retched purple flame a kilometre long from its toothed maw before a backdraught caught in its gullet, blasting it open from within and hurling thousands of tiny, flash-frozen tyranid creatures into the darkness.

At Mardelech's command, the battle-barge powered on through the fireball, ramming the great, dying beast clean in half on her prow. The void shields crackled, lashing arcs of lightning against lesser xenos

vessels, convulsing and scattering their organic forms from the engagement. One of *Omerta's* long tentacular arms was flung wide, slapping against its xenos-kin *Jaduli* as it tried to follow the ailing strike cruiser *Atreides* and sending it bucking away.

But *Rocola* was ready.

#78114 *Rocola*. A mollusc-shelled whorl of a hive ship, with a cluster of hungry feeder tendrils protruding from its armoured bulk.

Momentarily blinded by the death of *Omerta*, the *Honour's Might* ran too close to this ravenous new threat. Sirens howled on every deck as those powerful tendrils breached her engagement zone and tore through the armoured hull in a dozen places.

The void shields, overloaded beyond capacity, gave out in a blinding riot of colour, three of the generators detonating spontaneously inside the ship. First Company veterans in heavy Terminator armour moved as quickly as they were able to the voided compartments, ready to repel any xenos boarders, or even to move onto the hive ship itself in a daring counter-attack, should the opportunity present itself.

*Rocola* hauled itself up towards the dorsal plane of the battle-barge, like some hideous, gargantuan parasite mounting its host. The feeder tendrils heaved on the ship's structure, buckling the adamantium spine that had been laid down millennia earlier in the shipyards of Old Ultramar, and penetrating deeper into the compromised levels. Battery guns spat death at the beast, but its armoured shell was thick and strong. In desperation, Mardelech gave the order for a full broadside into the grappling monster, and damn the collateral damage at such close range.

But before the gunnery officers could carry out his command, *Rocola's* questing tendrils tore into the engineering decks.

Power failures coruscated down the length of the *Honour's Might*, and emergency klaxons heralded the irreversible collapse of her reactor fail-safes. Almost at the same moment, *Rocola* flexed the bulk of its tendrils with seemingly impossible strength, and sheared through the aft portion of the battle-barge amidships.

Screams and alerts flooded the vox. The howls of the trapped and the dying. A thousand curses from those helpless onlookers in the fleet anchorage, and at the bastion on the planet below.

Four destroyer-class vessels implored Chapter Master Thorcyra to let

them form up and race from Miral II to aid the flagship, but their pleas went unanswered.

As the other hive ships spread away from *Rocola*'s brood-swarm's feeding frenzy, the battle-barge's reactor in the tumbling engine section went critical, atomising every piece of organic and iron detritus within a hundred kilometres with the fury of a miniature star. The white-hot flare set the remains of the *Honour's Might* ablaze with nuclear fire, and seared great, blackened marks across *Rocola*'s shell even as it set to its grim feast.

The *Atreides* powered away for the far side of the planet on guttering engines, attracting only desultory pursuit from the smaller tyrannid vessels. Reports would later be made that the shipmistress drew her sidearm and shot herself in front of the oculus and her bridge crew.

*Jaduli* and #16902 *Xeper*, the crone-like sister of *Omerta*, began to settle into Miral Prime's upper orbit. No one and nothing was left between them and the planet below.

Hive Fleet Kraken had achieved void-superiority over a home world of the Scythes of the Emperor for a second time.



# CHAPTER NINE

## FROM THE SKIES

The interceptor cannons blazed. Guided by automated targeting systems as well as the keen eyes of their gunners, they stitched the heavens with seemingly unending hails of bright tracer fire, and sent salvo after salvo of flak to follow after it.

On every facing of the bastion, the roar of the guns was almost deafening.

It was a storm inverted, with flashes of las-lightning and the thunder of heavy cannons following a hot, steel rain up into the sky. The dark clouds at ground level were drifting banks of gun smoke, rocket propellant and coolant steam, stirred only gently by the languid breeze from the jungle beyond the mesa top.

A siren sounded at the base of Interceptor Four, the whirling amber beacon signalling the ammunition loading crews to shunt fresh reserves into the turret's magazines – it was the sixth time this particular quad-gun had run dry in the last thirty-one minutes. With their awkward, hastily learned reloading procedure taking crucial seconds longer than it should have, the serfs cursed wildly as the hoppers clanked empty, jamming three of the four barrels and settling the belt feed mechanism to its idle safety mode once more.

Inside the command centre of the Giant's Coffin, Brother Keltru half

turned in his seat. ‘I-Four is down again!’ he called out. ‘Showing multiple loading failures on my screen.’

Culmonios squeezed his clenched fists tighter.

‘Damn it – send a Techmarine in there. Clear the jams and get it firing again.’

From across the chamber, the human armoury liaison keyed his terminal display to the main tactical hololith. ‘All Chapter adepts are engaged. I have two serf engineers ready to assess, instead. Authorising now.’

Even as the man spoke, Interceptor Nine flashed up a magazine depletion warning.

Seven per cent. Five. Two. Dry.

His hearts pounding in frustration, Culmonios booted the command lectern. ‘Skyshield control! Report status!’ he roared.

Amidst all the serfs and Chapter warriors in their gold-and-black livery, a red-robed acolyte of the Adeptus Mechanicus was a far more rare sight. The woman turned her head with an artificial, mechanical smoothness, her tri-ocular lenses focusing on the bastion commander’s armoured form. The modulated tones of her voice were infuriatingly calm.

‘Skyshield status, holding. Repulsor field integrity at ninety-eight per cent.’

Culmonios gripped the lectern with both hands. Through the cold metal, he could feel the vibration of the relentless cannonfire outside the bastion.

He took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. ‘Then, it seems we might yet have a chance. Assuming the reactor can run *forever*...’

On the hololith, dozens of incoming contacts plunged through the skies of Miral Prime with every passing minute. It was a continent-sized spread, the spawn of two hive ships making planetfall en masse – a hundred thousand organic spore pods hurtling down towards the surface, trailing fire behind them as they came. Each of those pods, some more than ten metres long, bloated and armoured in crimson chitin against the heat of re-entry and the guns of the bastion’s defenders, would carry the xenos foe to the ground in numbers unknown.

Until the charred shells cracked open, that was, and their living cargo was revealed.

There was no obvious pattern to the spread. No clustering or focus. Unlike the targeted orbital drops executed by the elite forces of the

Adeptus Astartes or the Astra Militarum, the Kraken's children seemed driven only by the primitive urge to seek solid earth beneath their clawed feet. The monster *Heloth's* foul brood had crashed down into the jungle, visiting such misery upon the Scythes of the Emperor before being dispatched, at great cost. The Chapter had possessed what little advantage there was, and still they had lost almost all of Second Company in its execution.

But where *Heloth's* fall had been a rain of broken alien flesh, this was a deluge.

No tactical record or archived battle account from the Tyrannic War had ever mentioned an invasion quite like it, before the fall of Sotha. Was this, then, another new trick of Hive Fleet Kraken? Or was it simply that no one had ever survived such a rapid and overwhelming assault to tell of it?

Against all fragile hope and reason, Culmonios watched as a fresh wave of red contacts appeared at high altitude on the display, descending fast.

'There is no end to them,' he murmured. 'No end. It's like they dumped a pail of grave-worms over our heads.'

And so the guns continued to fire. They blasted tyrannid pods from the heavens by the score, vaporising them with searing las or tearing them open with interceptor rounds. They sent clutches of half-cognisant xenos tumbling through the air from their breached birth sacs, curled foetal or vomiting amniotic filth as they fell. Some thudded lifelessly into the open, treeless expanse around the mesa. Others crackled into the active skyshield that covered most of the Giant's Coffin from above, quickly being torn apart by the fierce repulsor energies and scattered to its periphery.

Further away from the bastion, those Chapter gunships that had not been assigned to escort the more lightly armed transports away to the fleet anchorage now strafed the deep jungle beyond the eastern outposts. Following fragmentary sensor returns broken by the dense undergrowth, they blitzed the terrain with incendiary firestorms that threw up roiling black clouds of smoke and glowing embers, purging any potential xenos impact sites before they could pose a threat.

For it was apparent to every warrior stationed at the Coffin that the tyrannid assault was not even vaguely concentrated on the mesa itself.

This was a *planetary* invasion. They meant to devour the entire world.

The armoury liaison gave the all clear. ‘Interceptor Four is operational,’ he reported, his relief apparent. ‘Ammunition replenished, ready to recommence firing on your—’

Culmonios thumped the lectern’s top. ‘Do not wait for my command! Fire! Fire now, or I’ll have you and that wretched gunner thrown from the clifftop!’

Brother Nimeon moved quietly to his side. ‘Peace, commander. These men and women will probably serve you better if you do not threaten to kill them at every opportunity.’

Grinding his teeth, Culmonios cast his gaze around the chamber and the serf officers at each of the tactical stations. Their fragile, mortal weariness was plain to see.

‘I am not certain that this is my true calling, brother,’ he admitted. ‘I yearn to face the Kraken on the field of battle again, not hiding away in this miserable rock. This is an abstraction of war that is familiar to me, as it is to us all, and yet it does not quench my thirst for bloody retribution. My fingers have forgotten what a chainsword’s grip feels like.’

‘You were given this honourable duty by the Chapter Master. To defend the Giant’s Coffin, and our new home world.’

Culmonios laughed. It was a desperate kind of mirth.

‘Defend this world? Are you not seeing what I see when I look at those sensor returns? We are barely – *barely!* – keeping the skies clear over our heads. For every xenos pod we shoot down, five more make their landing within a hundred kilometres of here. At Sotha we had the *Aegida* orbital and the defence grid, and the full might of our fleet brought to bear upon the invaders before they reached the ground. This time, they don’t even seem to know or care where we are. They’re rolling right over us.’

Nimeon gazed mournfully at the hololith, and the data scrolling across it. The cogitators could not lie.

‘Master Thorcyra will rally the fleet and order them to our aid,’ he said, almost sounding as though he had convinced himself. ‘They’ll recover from the loss of the *Honour’s Might*, and push the other hive ships back.’

Culmonios shook his head. ‘No, he won’t. Not now. He won’t risk them, not without a battle-barge leading from the front. He’ll order the fleet to leave the system before the tyranids catch up with them. We can hold out longer on the ground than they can in the void.’ The bastion commander

toyed absently with the hilt of his sheathed combat knife, imagining the exquisite give of xenos flesh parting beneath the blade's edge once more. 'And this *will* turn into a ground war. Our shields and our interceptor cannons have seen to that. It's the only way the xenos will be able to take the bastion now.'

He turned back to the command chamber.

'So, brother, I will carry out the honourable duty I have been given, and look to the defence of the Coffin until we are victorious, or death takes me. But do not urge me to be kind to the serfs along with it. I no longer have the heart, nor stomach, for kindness.'

'What victory can you imagine, then?' Nimeon asked. 'With no fleet to relieve us, no hope of communicating beyond the borders of the Miral System and Captain Thracian having disappeared with the *Heart of*—'

Before he could finish, the chamber doors slid open. Flanked by two of his honour guard and followed by the Librarian Spiridonas, Chapter Master Thorcyra strode into the command centre. Beyond Nimeon and Culmonios, fewer than half of those present in the chamber even noticed his arrival, or deigned to rise from their stations in acknowledgement of it.

Under the circumstances, it was understandable.

'Commander Culmonios,' said Thorcyra, 'I have sent orders to the outpost on Miral Two. The remnant of our fleet is to move beyond the system-edge, in continued opposition to the xenos approach, as soon as the *Atreides* and the transport craft reach them. They will await Thracian's return, with the superior weaponry salvaged from the Chapter arsenal, and then move as one to engage and destroy the tyrannid vessels of the Miral Rex splinter. From there, we will drive these soulless abominations from our new home forever.'

Culmonios gave Nimeon a short, knowing look. He did not return it.

'You believe, then, my lord,' Nimeon began, 'that Captain Thracian will indeed return?'

'I have no choice but to believe it. If he does not, then we are lost.'

Culmonios felt his hearts beginning to quicken once more. 'Indeed. And in the meantime, you intend for us to engage the enemy from our stronghold, here? To punish the Kraken for all they have done?'

Spiridonas raised his brow, quizzically. 'Tell me, brother – what are you really fighting for?' The Librarian's eyes were half-closed, but his features

were twisted in a perpetual, haunted grimace.

His question brought Culmonios up short. ‘I... I do not...’

‘Stand for nothing, and be named a coward. Try to protect too much, and you will fail. You must choose your battles more carefully – swear only those oaths that you can conceivably keep, and always be mindful of your own limitations. That is not cowardice. It is pragmatism.’

Culmonios frowned. ‘But we are held to a greater standard by the Imperium, are we not? How will history remember us as anything more than meek cowards, if we do not seek recompense for the wrongs we have suffered?’

On the hololithic system map, the fleet began to break into smaller battle groups. The thunder of the interceptor cannons outside the bastion grew louder.

‘History?’ muttered Thorcyra. ‘In the shadows of war, history only remembers that which we allow to be recorded.’ He straightened, rolling his weary shoulders inside his armour. ‘Now, commander – let us return to the battlements and look upon this glorious storm of fire with our own eyes.’

In the depths of the Mirali jungle, the Kraken’s children lay.

Amidst the blazing brushwood and in the steaming shallows of boggy marshes, the spore pods that had reached the surface quivered and clacked. Occasionally, a tumble of disturbed earth or the fall of a broken tree would trigger the reflexive defences of the unthinking craft; they would spray hissing bio-acid or incendiary fluids from twitching projector appendages, with no concept of the success or failure of such actions. The pods had only one task: to deliver their broods safely to the prey-world. Sensory organs tasted the atmosphere in anticipation. Grotesque probosces drew hungrily from the remains of crushed native flora.

Somewhere above the clouds, unseen, wallowed the obscene forms of *Xeper* and *Jaduli*. The guns of the Giant’s Coffin gradually fell to silence as the last of the spores rolled across the heavens, north west to south east – the hive ships were traversing in orbit, casting immense shadows over the landscape not with their own vast bodies, but those of their innumerable spawn.

And, from somewhere deep within their inscrutable, void-born interiors,

a signal-impulse was delivered.

The battle-brothers stood closest to Librarian Spiridonas would have seen him lose his stride, his grip upon the force staff tightening. He sensed the psychic clarion of the tyrannid race on a level that no other living warrior of the Chapter on Miral Prime could have.

In every language and no language at all, the hive ships cried out as one for their children to rise, to conquer.

To devour.

Brood by brood, spreading at the speed of thought across the already ravaged surface of the planet, the impulse was received. Primal instincts were awakened and almost immediately overridden. Spore pods petalled open in splatters of lactic foulness. Chitin fractured. Muscles only ever intended for one single, wrenching movement fulfilled their purpose and, torn and bleeding, were spent. Birthing contractions ejected hyper-evolved warrior creatures of every stripe, slick and heaving their first agonised breaths, onto the bare ground.

The psychic synapses of the xenos broodmind asserted themselves. Within minutes, perimeter sensors at the bastion's command centre registered movement and bio-signatures that set the flesh of their operators crawling. Soon after, the choked howls of a billion inhuman creatures began to echo from horizon to horizon.

And then the Kraken's children began to move beneath the skies of the doomed world.

Miral Prime, however, did not know that it was doomed. In this regard alone, fate still chose to gift the Scythes of the Emperor with just a morsel of favour.

For countless generations, the tribal peoples of the death world had clung to what passed for their primitive spiritual beliefs – beliefs, indeed, that were centred upon the great mesa of the Giant's Coffin. This was a planet that by its very nature seemed determined to resist external colonisation or settlement of any kind, where almost every living organism was a threat. Accordingly, it had bred a hardy culture of men and women, resourceful and wily, aggressive and proud. Through the generations, they had come to know their home world. Their ways and traditions were the product of an unceasing struggle for survival, with skills learned and honed over uncounted centuries.

While the many and variform tyrannid beasts were, individually, a match for almost any human warrior, the xenos did not know the planet as anything other than an abundance of prey.

Ironic, it was, that Miral Prime seemed to regard them in much the same manner.

Across the equatorial expanse, far beyond the sight and knowledge of the Chapter warriors and their fearful servants holed up at the Coffin, the war against the invaders began at the most primeval level. Packs of Mirali clawgibbons leapt upon scuttling termagant horrors and beat them to death with their oversized fists, only to be scythed down by chameleonic stalkers with poison-tipped flesh hooks. Crawling, arthropoidal rippers and winged, blind worms with maws full of razored teeth devoured charred bark, dead birds and fallen tyrannids alike, even as lone carrion-hawks swooped down to snatch their rapidly bloating bodies and carry them away to thorny nests in the treetops. The jungle floor heaved at the wary tread of the larger tyrannid warrior bio-forms, their predatory senses turned ever towards the circling monsters beneath their feet – the xenos snatched and devoured from below were matched only in number by those land sharks that were themselves encircled and torn apart underground by broods of burrowing alien raveners.

Still, kilometre by kilometre, the children of the Kraken advanced with the cold, unsympathetic determination shared by all the hive fleets of the tyrannid race. In the hours that followed, they hunted and slayed. They screamed and they killed.

As the day's heat grew, the unseen war slowly, inexorably tipped in their favour.

The Mirali tribes knew better than to come between such forces of nature. They withdrew, as quickly and quietly as they were able, to their hidden places among the rocks of the mesas, murmuring prayers to whatever heathen spirits they thought might protect them along the way.

After all, it seemed very clear to them that the distant Giant-Emperor's undying gaze was far from Miral that day.

Conversely, from their vantage atop the bastion ramparts, Master Thorcyra's gaze was fixed upon the ragged treeline beyond the Coffin. Heat haze rose from the bare rock of the mesa on the other side of the

outer gates and Aegis lines, and beyond that lay the region that the Chapter had cleared by hand, days earlier. Those felled trunks that were not blackened and burned by promethium flamers were cracking in the glare of the sun, and the denuded ground beneath them was slowly baking into dust.

That dust was being whipped up in squalls. Not by the midday breeze, of which there was precious little, but by the rippling detonations of cluster mines.

Sergeant Brimelow's voice crackled over the vox. '*Did I not promise you, brother?*'

Thorcyra turned to Culmonios, the unspoken question clear in his expression.

The bastion commander shifted as other eyes turned to him, expectantly.

'He, uhh... He said we would hear it all the way up here,' he murmured, scraping imaginary dirt from the back of his gauntlet, 'when the enemy reached the line.'

The Chapter Master did not react, but turned back to the scene of carnage unfolding before them. A fresh brace of explosions tore through the trunk of a great tree only a dozen metres inside the treeline, sending it crashing to the ground. The bright flashes came half a second before the echoing bangs at this distance, snap-silhouetting dying xenos in the shade of the jungle foliage with each blast and followed by flares soaring up into the air overhead. Other veteran Scythes manning the ramparts spat, invoking the names of those loyal brethren dead at Sotha as both a curse and benediction.

Culmonios glanced down to the squads grimly forming up in the mustering yards, then to the Devastators on the outer wall, with their flak-armoured serf ammunition runners crouched ready by their sides. He picked out each of the camo-netted artillery emplacements and the Militarum gunnery officers standing by. He watched the Predator turrets tracking back and forth across the open mesa, waiting for the first of their targets to emerge. He noted the tiny, distant specks of Stormtalon gunships circling high over the eastern mesa outposts on the horizon, and beyond them the burned wreckage of the *Heloth* bio-titans – there, he knew, was where the Thunderhawks and Storm Eagles had set down, to establish a temporary rally point for any survivors as well as awaiting further orders

from the Coffin.

The Scythes of the Emperor would soon face their most hated foes once more. This was the final beat of the marching drum, before the din of battle would overwhelm it.

Culmonios found that he had been holding his breath, and exhaled slowly so as not to make it sound like a sigh. Then he opened a link to the command centre.

‘Brother Keltru, any word from the fleet?’

*‘Nothing, commander. Not since they outran the pursuing hive ships and moved beyond our comms range.’*

Nimeon looked at him through the lenses of his battle helm. ‘It was a little too much to hope for, perhaps.’

Culmonios nodded. ‘Aye,’ he muttered. ‘At least they had time to evacuate the outpost on Miral Two. Their monitor patrol ships wouldn’t have lasted more than a few minutes against the swarm.’

A cry went up from further along the battlements, quickly repeated and passed from man to man among the serf security officers. ‘They have broken through! The xenos have broken through!’

‘Let me pass!’ Thorcyra demanded, pushing his way between Chapter brethren and members of his honour guard. ‘This moment will be long remembered, and I will see it for myself, beneath our great battle standard!’

Looking out over the northern edge of the mesa, down the steep, rocky face, the enemy finally, *finally* came into view.

A trio of slender hunters led the way at an impressive speed beneath the hissing arc of a trip-flare, each taller than a Dreadnought and digging into the open ground with every galloping strike of their bladed forelimbs. As the dust was whipped up around them, Culmonios fancied that they seemed almost to fade from sight... Until the leftmost of their number snagged itself on a tripwire and set off the final cluster charges some three hundred metres out from the Coffin, blasting it clean into the air and trailing alien gore behind it. Chameleon or not, it died thrashing on the ground to the cheers of the bastion defenders.

The same was not true of the creatures that followed.

Long of skull and hunched low, the gaunt beasts fairly boiled from the shattered ruin of the jungle, dozens of them loping forwards on lean,

powerful legs. They made for the sheer wall without thought for their own preservation, and they were met first by the well-ordered fire of Brimelow's Scout brethren. Snaps of las-fire and Stalker-pattern bolt shells tore into them, each shot a fresh kill, and all it did was turn the angle of the xenos charge back towards the west, to the beginnings of the slope that approached the main gates.

Warning sirens began to howl in the muster yards. The treeline was breached in two more places. Now three. Five.

Thorcyra's face was a mask of murderous hatred. He glared at Culmonios, mania creeping in at the corners of his eyes.

'We will take them, commander!' he roared. 'We will weather this wave, and the next, and the next!'

'Respectfully, my lord,' Nimeon cut in, his voiced raised over the growing clamour, 'they will not come in waves, but a single tsunami. Like the orbital drop, the Kraken relies on weight of numbers. A lightning assault to bury us, just as they did at Sotha.'

Thorcyra donned his skull-helm. 'They shall not bury the Coffin,' he growled, before striding away with his guards close behind.

Culmonios felt the familiar, cold fury growing in his hearts. He forced it back down and opened a channel to the armoured divisions. 'Hold your fire, brothers. We will wait until they swarm so deep that even our stray shots will strike something.'

Switching to the pre-arranged Militarum frequency, he raised a gauntleted hand.

'Honoured allies, commence frontal barrage.'

A moment later, the guns of the emplaced Griffons spoke. Their range was far in excess of the cleared zone beyond the mesa, but their role in the defence had been calculated many days earlier – they were to drive the tyranids forwards into the Scythes' fire arcs, by overshooting and staggering the broods still within the cover of the jungle canopy.

As the first of their shells rained down, Culmonios' vox-link chimed.

*'Commander, this is Keltru. The sensorium officers have concluded that hive vessel Rocola has re-entered the engagement, and is adding its strength to the invasion forces.'*

'Status?'

*'At this time, the foul thing is still on the far side of the planet, but we*

*anticipate a secondary pass in a little over ten hours.*’ There was a pause as Keltru conferred with the human command staff. *‘That’s just after nightfall by the Coffin’s time, brother.’*

Culmonios swept his gaze around the distant treeline. It was lousy with lesser tyrannid beasts, and already choked with their dismembered and burning corpses. What branches remained now shook with the eardrum-splitting thunder of artillery strikes and the press of xenos bodies, amidst the black smoke of battle.

‘We’ll barely have chewed through their vanguard by nightfall,’ he replied. ‘If we’re still here by the morning, it will be a miracle...’

He turned to Nimeon. The Chapter’s battle standard flew behind them, as proud and defiant as ever.

‘Have the Tactical squads move to first positions. I want everyone on the walls. Take up the battle-hymns, and let’s remind ourselves what we’re fighting for.’

‘Vengeance,’ Nimeon agreed.

‘No. Not vengeance, not yet. Just survival – vengeance can come after.’



# CHAPTER TEN

## GREAT DEVOURER

If any of the defenders of the bastion at the Giant's Coffin had been of a more poetic mind, they might have fancied that the jungle itself was now retreating from the battle that raged on the open approaches to the mesa. With the blaze of gunfire and high-explosive rounds tearing into the bodies of tyranid creatures left and right, the xenos fell mid-stride amongst the splintering trunks, or piled in bloody drifts short of the diminishing treeline – in the day's heat, the charnel stink soon became overpowering. The swarms of flies were as thick as smoke.

As the minutes turned to hours, to clear the wider firing arcs of the mounds of alien corpses the Scythes and their Astra Militarum allies blasted them with missiles and even heavier ordnance. They scoured the open ground, soaking the dust red with gritty gore. Occasionally a dead bio-plasma gland or toxin sac would cook off, setting goutts of wild purple or green flame into the air. The mulch of severed limbs, fractured chitin and shredded vegetation burned in an acidic steam-haze, and the already reddened dust became a sucking mire beneath it.

But the tyranid assault did not cease, even for a moment.

Over the corpses of the scuttling hunter-slayers and gaunts came the hordes of ravenous, crawling rippers. Then more of the chameleonic

stalkers, and the ravener broods. When their charges faltered beneath the weight of Sothan firepower, the xenos brought forth guns of their own – the nauseating weapon analogues that spat bolts of plasma and barbed harpoons and acid sprays and flesh-boring beetles. When these failed against heavy ceramite and reinforced plasteel, the Kraken summoned the larger, lumbering creatures who were neither entirely beasts of burden nor walking bio-weapon mounts, but a hideous hybrid of the two. They launched drifting, gas-filled spore mines that detonated hard with the force of thrown grenades, or spurts of flame from distended bladders on their bellies.

Adapting, responding, ever-shifting, the xenos hive mind learned, as it always did, and altered its focus accordingly.

From the highest ramparts of the Giant's Coffin, what looked like Mirali birds began to wheel in the distant skies, presumably drawn towards the battle by the abundant promise of carrion.

They were not birds, of course.

Rippers first, then gargoyle creatures took to the air on leathery, membranous wings, guided by some unlearned morphic resonance or race memory. They flocked forth, shrieking and gnashing as they soared over their larger kin, some bearing compact, bony rifles while others snickered and lashed with tooth and talon. The bastion's tactical sensor returns were fouled by the things, too numerous to count, and the tight coordination of fire that the Scythes of the Emperor had employed until now was undone.

The gargoyles used the terrain to their advantage, shielding themselves from the worst of the confused auto-turret fire by keeping low and close to the sheer sides of the mesa. They sought out the hiding places of the Scout marksmen between the rocks, those youthful Space Marines so desperate to prove themselves to their training sergeants in the crucible of battle, and dived towards them with little regard for the snapshots fired in return. A standard Chapter-issue sniper rifle was capable of bringing down even a moderately armoured tyranid warrior-form with a well-aimed shot, and yet it suffered from a slow rate of fire.

This was the Scouts' undoing. Fewer than half of the neophytes ordered by Sergeant Brimelow into supporting fire positions made it back to the bastion, and many of those would be forced to wait long hours to do so under the cover of darkness.

So it was, also, that Culmonios' planned and orderly withdrawal of the Predator crews never took place.

Emboldened by their swooping cousins, the tyranids on the surface massed for a renewed assault on the outer gates of the Coffin. They died by the score to the autocannons and heavy bolters of the battle tanks, and yet more still took their place as the ground began to tremble beneath the weight of their clawed feet. They surged over the open ground, over what remained of their fallen predecessors and up the incline towards the slope of the mesa proper.

Signalled from the command centre, the waiting Rhino transports gunned their engines in readiness, but it was too late.

The fastest creatures struck the frontal glacis of the hull-down Predators at a full, loping sprint, crashing bodily into the turrets and sponsons, and upsetting their gunners' desperate aim. Heavy calibre shots began to whicker uselessly over the rest of the hunkered attackers that followed in their headlong charge. More xenos rammed themselves into the tanks – a living, toothy tide that smothered the armoured vehicles almost completely.

With deadly precision, they went for the access ports and vision slits first. Powerful blade-limbs wrenched into the recessed joints, heaving and cleaving, dragging the hatches open with squeals of tortured metal. Over the comm, roars of anger and frustration from the Space Marines trapped within soon gave way to bolt pistol shots and alien shrieks in enclosed spaces, then finally the gurgling, choking cries of the dying.

One of the Rhinos, seconded from Sixth Company, began to pull away with its embarkation ramp closing. Like crimson and ochre flashes, the quickest of the hunter-slayers leapt over the hydraulic mechanisms and into the empty troop compartment beyond – the driver had evidently not sealed the internal hatchway, as the vehicle suddenly wrenched around to the left and its vox-link fell dead. The uncontrolled transport slammed into a stationary Razorback before stalling out, its ruptured fuel tanks leaking onto the rocky ground beneath the chassis.

The resulting fireball took the Razorback along with it, and caused the defenders on the walls to recoil from the wash of intense heat.

Burning tyranids came on regardless, ignorant of the pain that their physical bodies must surely have felt. Their limbs were driven by the

uncaring, malignant impulses of the hive mind, and nothing short of complete destruction could hold them back.

One hundred, ninety, seventy-five yards from the bastion, they were met by boltgun and lascarbine fire from the Chapter warriors and serfs at the first Aegis lines. Kills were claimed, curses hurled and weapons reloaded.

Slowly, volley by volley, the xenos charge was turned, though it was of little comfort to the armoured division outside the gates. Another Razorback went under, its turret seized by the ruined flesh of dive-bombing gargoyle beasts, and the gunner's bloodied helmet clattered unceremoniously down the back of the hull.

'That's it,' Culmonios muttered. 'They're gone. Losses on the engagement perimeter confirmed as total.'

He and Sergeant Angeloi looked up to the Devastator squads deployed upon the ramparts overlooking the gates. The muzzle flare from their weapons lit up the ferrocrete crenellations against the darkening sky – bright green orbs of super-heated plasma that would incinerate alien flesh, the backflash of missile launchers sending explosive payloads streaking into the massing hordes. Culmonios could not see the foe with his own eyes, but every report he received added another miserable layer to the tableau of war.

Beneath the sturdy skyshield, protected from above, he and the rest of the Chapter could only wait. All around him, the Scythes of the Emperor made ready for the worst, their inexperienced new retainers fumbling with arming rituals that even the lowliest neophyte learned by rote. Culmonios could not comment. He had misplaced his own battle-helm somewhere along the way.

Angeloi checked his boltgun, adjusting the targeter by two more degrees. 'How long?'

'Until the gates fall?' the bastion commander replied. 'With their weight of numbers, the xenos could simply overrun the walls, given enough time. Our resistance will be like a troublesome knot in the mind of the hive ships. The harder we fight back, the more broods they'll commit to the ground assault, but—'

His words were drowned out by a full salvo launch from the Whirlwinds. The heavy missiles arced skywards before hurtling back down on fly-by-

wire targeting guidance protocols. They slammed into what remained of the churned jungle floor almost a kilometre away from the mesa and blasted dozens of tiny, dismembered corpses into the air, high enough that they could be seen from inside the bastion walls.

Culmonios smiled grimly. ‘We can’t outlast them. We’ll run out of ammunition long before they run out of things for us to shoot at.’

The vox-bead crackled in his ear. It was Brother Keltru once more.

*‘Commander! We have multiple large contacts approaching from the north west!’*

Culmonios glanced back at Angeloi. ‘Of course we do. You see?’ He activated the link. ‘Command centre, give me something useful. How big are they? Titans? Order the Militarum crews to target their positions.’

*‘Not titans, nothing like that. But there are approximately two dozen of them. I’m passing the data to the gunnery officers now, but they are running low on ordnance. And, at this range...’*

From their defilades, Culmonios saw the barrels of the larger Basilisk guns beginning to traverse, shifting their calculated angle of fire. He turned back to the bastion.

‘They will be besiegers, brother. Wreckers to bring down the gates that their smaller kin cannot. Order the gunship wings to mount another attack run as well, coordinated with the artillery strikes, focused on the anticipated route.’

*‘They lost three wings on the last sortie, commander. The xenos dominate the skies beyond the eastern mesas now. We’ve lost all contact with the outposts there.’*

‘We will lose the *Coffin*,’ Culmonios growled, ‘and then the gunships will be worthless. Order the attack run.’

Keltru confirmed, and closed the link. The commander turned back to Angeloi, calming himself as best he could. It would not be long now.

‘Where is Lord Thorcyra?’ the sergeant asked. ‘Why does he not prepare to meet the xenos in battle with the rest of us?’

Culmonios shook his head. ‘He waits for Thracian’s promised return. In spite of everything, he believes that the Master of the Fleet will honour his pledge.’

‘Assuming he makes it back in time. Before we’re all slopping around in the bellies of the xenos beasts, I mean.’

‘Aye, assuming that. I see that Sergeant Romonos is keeping a low profile, though. He always spoke highly of his captain, before he...’

The commander’s words trailed away. He frowned.

‘Does... Did Thorcyra seem different, to you?’ he asked, somewhat furtively. ‘Changed, since the Kraken arrived in-system?’

The Astra Militarum guns opened fire, the overpressure they unleashed reverberating in his chest as they commenced their new barrage.

Angeloi peered around at the battle-brothers nearest to them, and spoke quietly beneath the roar. ‘He seemed more conservative than many of us expected, upon his return. But much of his earlier rhetoric has shifted. He seems *conflicted*, perhaps.’

‘Hmm. That I can understand.’

The sergeant slung his boltgun from its strap across his right shoulder. He regarded Culmonios for a moment.

‘You think more like the rest of us do,’ he said. ‘Those of us who fought at Sotha. I think you’d be surprised how many of our brothers will follow you gladly, in pursuit of cold vengeance rather than this promised salvation.’

A shout from the battlements caught their attention. Serf guards and one of Thorcyra’s veterans were pointing away in the direction of the renewed artillery strikes.

‘Carnifexes!’ someone cried in a voice heavy with mortal fear. ‘There are carnifexes out there in the jungle!’

The neophyte’s struggle was ended, the gurney beneath him soaked cinnabar-crimson with his hyper-clotted blood. Apothecary Machaon straightened sharply.

‘Damn them!’ he spat, throwing one surgical glove aside. ‘Damn the Kraken!’

Maderie and two other medicae adepts set down their instruments, their eyes red and tired above their wrap-masks. The neophyte’s young battle-brother withdrew his hand from the body cavity, where he had been holding the damaged artery closed, and sank to the tiled floor.

The apothecarion resembled an abattoir. Such suffering had been heaped upon the few Scythes present – those who had been overcome by the enemy and yet survived long enough to reach the care of Machaon and his

brethren.

When victorious, the tyranids did not leave many wounded. They certainly took no prisoners.

From where he crouched, down by the air circulation vent, the young trog aspirant Hwylgir screwed up his face in anguish. He wept openly at the sight of this dead Scout, and the tears left clean track marks down his grubby cheeks. The unkempt hair on his head trembled with each quiet sob.

Machaon kicked the vent as he passed. ‘Be quiet, boy. This is where most of your kind will end up, you know.’

After helping the crippled Keltru to get himself established up in the command centre, Hwylgir had been forcibly ejected from the chamber by Master Thorcyra’s Sothan-born guards. They had apparently spat on him and called him a savage, and threatened to shoot him if he tried to return.

Maderie had found him rocking silently in the medicae stores. His shoulder bore the faint acid burns associated with Space Marine saliva, and so she had believed his side of the tale. But the rest of the Mirali aspirants had already begun primary conditioning and gene-seed implantation procedures, and were still in isolation following their surgeries. Machaon couldn’t put him in with them. Nor did the bastion yet have any detention cells.

And so, in what was far from his finest hour, Brother- Apothecary Machaon had manacled Hwylgir to the air circulation vent with heat-fused plastek restraints, to stop him from getting under the medicae staff’s feet. The boy had howled and thrashed against the restraints, until the first of the casualties had been brought in. Then, wide-eyed and fearful at the grim sights and sounds of a Chapter Apothecary’s duties in the nightmare of a xenos siege, he had retreated into the small gap between the pipe and the wall.

‘This is no-good place,’ he sobbed over and over to himself. ‘No-good place. No-good place.’

Devastator Sergeant Kalos had stopped screaming, at least. He had been hit in the face by a deathspitter maggot fired up from the xenos throng in an earlier charge – and Throne only knew why he had been peering down over the parapet in the heat of battle! He had lost his sight to the bio-weapon’s attack; it had burned through his visor in an instant, crazing his

auto-senses and triggering agonising neural feedback as the lenses melted away. Then the poison had got to work on his face. The fat little ballistic creature was already dead by the time the serfs managed to drag Kalos from the wall, but Machaon had spent several minutes trying to extract it from the liquefied ruin of the sergeant's sinal cavity, where it had settled, before pumping him full of analgesics and counter-septic agents and moving on to the next casualty instead.

The maggot wasn't going anywhere. It could wait.

The Apothecary raised a vox-thief recording unit to his lips, speaking over the chaotic din of improvised surgeries and painful triage. 'Neophyte Lacovis, cause of death – multiple wounds and extreme blood loss.'

He placed a hand upon the shoulder of the remaining Scout. The youth looked up at him, his eyes unfocused.

'You did right by him, lad,' Machaon assured him. 'It was no mean feat to carry him all the way back here. No Scythe could ask for more in their battle-brothers than that kind of loyalty.'

The neophyte nodded, wiping the blood from his hands on his uniform fatigues. 'He... He was my cousin. Before the Chapter. He was my Sothan blood-kin, as well as my battle-brother.'

'Then avenge him thrice over. Make the xenos filth pay.'

Machaon helped the Scout to his feet. The name *ESAU* was machine-stamped into the scratched and pitted pauldron of his carapace armour.

'Neophyte Esau,' he said, 'do you know Sergeant Brimelow's current location?'

Esau shook his head. 'No. We lost contact with the rest of our squad when the gargoyles swept through. But there were a lot of bodies on the rocks when I brought Lacovis up...'

A heavy, squeaking thump against the glass of the observation window caused them both to turn, alert. Hwygir rose quickly to his feet in the corner, bleating and yammering in his own savage tongue.

On the other side of the glass were two wounded Mirali trogs, decked out with flaky war-paint and bone fetishes around their necks and arms. Between them they half guided, half carried another wounded Chapter Scout, whose entrails hung from his torn abdomen as he staggered and groaned along the corridor.

But these trogs were not aspirants. They were adult tribesmen.

*Oh, Throne...*

Machaon bounded for the sealed doorway. ‘Help me with him!’ he cried out to the dumbstruck Esau. ‘Someone, bring a gurney!’

They grabbed the neophyte’s arms, hauling him into the apothecarion and down onto the nearest cot, leaving gory smears on the door’s jamb. As serf-adepts rushed to tend the new patient, Machaon rounded on the two trogs.

‘How did you enter the bastion?’ he demanded, drawing his pistol. ‘You didn’t come in through the main gates or past the auto-turrets, that’s for certain!’

The nearest of the savages barked something feral, and shoved Esau back a pace. The neophyte stumbled into a surgical slab, almost losing his footing, before drawing his long-bladed combat knife.

The aspirant Hwylgir was still shouting from across the room. Machaon was about to order him to silence when the lead trog raised his flinty axe.

The bolt pistol shot was painfully loud in the enclosed chamber. It tore the man’s chest open, blowing his innards against the wall and spattering his comrade’s startled face with dark blood and tiny gobbets of flesh. Esau spun away, clutching his eyes where a piece of bony shrapnel had struck him.

Machaon ignored the screams of his human aides. He calmly took aim at the other trog, who backed away, raising his hands in obvious surrender.

‘Don’t kill!’ Hwylgir screamed, his voice cracking. ‘Friend! Don’t kill!’

‘Ask him, then. Ask him how they got through the defensive line.’

Hwylgir wiped his eyes and nose on the back of his tied hands, babbling in Mirali to the tribesman. The warrior, keeping his eyes deferentially on the floor in spite of his rising panic, answered quickly.

‘Him have tell, come to Coffin!’ Hwylgir repeated in his broken Gothic. ‘Come have from-rock!’

Machaon kept his weapon up, glancing back at Esau as the neophyte pulled a hard, white sliver from his eyelid. ‘What? What is “from-rock”?’

The runty trog growled in frustration at being unable to make himself understood. Then, leaning and weaving against his tethered restraints, he broke into battle-sign.

*Hidden access. Subterranean. Eastern outposts.*

Machaon’s arm lowered slowly. A chill spread through him.

*Overwhelming enemy strength. Many casualties. Perimeter is not secure.*

‘You mean, the caves under the Giant’s Coffin...’ Machaon mumbled. The sickening emptiness yawned in his gut. ‘They’re linked to the other mesas. And the xenos could come by the same route, right under our feet.’

The Basilisks and mortars fell silent, their barrels ticking as they cooled. It was not to give their targets any respite – merely to avoid the possibility of friendly fire.

Over the cries of the massed xenos on the ground, the howl of approaching jets rose.

First came the Stormtalons, the smaller interceptors serving as outriders to the main attack wings. They stitched the swooping gargoyles and larger flying bio-forms with assault cannon fire, shredding their lean bodies to clear the skies ahead.

Then came the gunships, mighty Storm Eagles and ’Ravens. They soared over the Mirali terrain, strafing the scuttling alien hordes on the ground and blitzing the jungle with explosive rockets, before banking away to the south and the freshly landed spawn of *Rocola* that were being tracked on the orbital scanners.

Finally, the Thunderhawks were clear to make their attack run.

Six of them, flying in a staggered V-formation, swept low over the ravaged tree canopy, their main gunners ready and seeking their targets.

The larger xenos brutes, just shy of a score in number, were barging their way through the jungle, felling swathes of trees in their haste to reach the Coffin. They were hunched and roaring monsters, these carnifexes, with spined carapaces and twin sets of cleaving forelimbs; however, they did not lash out at the undergrowth so much as uproot it with their bulk and unwitting strength. Several of their brood had fallen to lucky strikes from the artillery, and many more bore grievous shrapnel wounds and burns that would have slain lesser creatures outright. But even these great beasts were driven by the cunning of the hive mind, and they had instinctively moved to protect those few among their number that were intended for the assault proper.

These were larger still, with powerful, crab-like claws evidently bred to pull down all but the most heavily reinforced fortifications. Their exoskeletons were elongated into pointed rams, their tails even longer and

weighted like demolition balls. They were the targets that the bastion commander had identified for the gunships' attack run, though Culmonios could never have imagined quite how literally, bluntly correct his assertions would be.

The Thunderhawks opened fire when they were almost on top of them.

Battle cannon shells streaked from six dorsal weapon mounts, accompanied by the jagged slashes of armour-piercing lascannon fire. Explosions tore through the carnifex brood with far more devastating accuracy than the Astra Militarum could manage from extreme range, blasting two of the lesser brutes into a messy ruin.

The others roared in annoyance and outrage, like wild animals stung by insects. Their headlong drive towards the great mesa slowed as they tried to weave and face the aircraft shooting past overhead.

Then, from many of them, the roars became something else. Shrieks, almost.

Screams. Screams building in power and intensity.

They dug their hooves into the ground and wracked their bodies in emetic convulsions, their gullets flaring purple with bio-plasma as it erupted from their open maws. The bolts trailed up into the air with surprising force, striking the main engines and left wing of a trailing Thunderhawk gunship.

The pilot tried to compensate for the impacts but lost control, clipping the craft next to his in formation. As the breached fuel tanks detonated on the first Thunderhawk, scattering the blazing fuselage over three hundred metres of jungle, the second spiralled to the ground in a suicidal dive.

Some kilometres away, Culmonios saw the fireball of the impact mushrooming up from the burning canopy against the twilight. 'Eyes on target,' he said into the vox, still staring out from his wall-top vantage. 'Can we confirm the kills?'

*'Negative, commander. Carnifex brood is resuming its advance. Estimate contact in thirty-nine minutes, at current speed.'*

'Tell our Militarum allies to resume the gunnery mission, then,' he sighed. 'They'll become easier to mark as they get closer to the Coffin. Meanwhile, bring the gunships around for another pass.'

There was a notable pause. Brother Keltru was distracted. *'Astra Militarum liaisons are reporting insufficient ordnance to continue as directed, commander. They would hold something for the final push. Also,*

*remaining Thunderhawks are pulling back to final rendezvous coordinates, to await Master Thorcyra's further command.'*

The bastion commander scowled, at no one in particular. 'What?'

*'Chapter Master Thorcyra will address the Chapter soon. He has grounded our aerial assets – they are to be a weapon of last resort, if all else fails.'*

Culmonios rammed his armoured fist into the parapet, scuffing the black paint on his knuckles. 'One last pebble cast into the ocean, after the tide has already come in,' he muttered. 'They'll be nothing more than that.'

With the booming snap of immense relays, the bastion's floodlights lit up, casting the gloomy battlefield around the mesa in a false but bright light, as well as the murderous approach to the outer gates. The commander watched as the tyranids became riled by the sudden glare, howling their anger at these artificial, white suns conjured from nowhere by their human prey. Flocks of enraged gargoyles hurled themselves at the lights, perhaps hoping to snuff them out again with the sacrifice of their own bodies, but many collided instead with the shimmering skyshield and broke their necks upon it.

Further down the mesa, the warriors upon the outer walls were continuing to repel the Kraken's fervent assault, though their weapons glowed hot and the blasted corpses of the xenos were piled deep on the rocks beyond them.

A stray fleshborer shot passed within a few millimetres of Culmonios' cheek. He flinched, but the living beetle-projectile struck the hard ferrocrete of the battlement beside him and fell still. He gazed at it for a long moment before speaking into the vox again.

'Brother, the time is upon us. Everyone can sense it. The Scythes of the Emperor will not leave the Giant's Coffin – the next dawn that we see shall be our last.'

There was no reply. Only the background din of the command centre, filtered through the open channel.

Culmonios cut the link. What use was there in speaking any more?

Human speech was an inefficient, flawed affectation, he realised, compared to the synaptic group-mind of the hive fleets. The Kraken's children did ever as they were bid, without a spoken word passing between them. It spoke to Culmonios of the altogether greater unity of the tyranid race, the ephemeral species-connection that linked every burrowing

beetle-projectile to its parent bio-weapon, and that in turn to the creature that wielded it, and that to the brood-mother, and that to the hive...

And, well, there it was. It lay in ruins all around them even now.

‘We will come for you,’ he murmured, crushing the dead beetle beneath his boot. ‘Wherever and whatever “the Kraken” might truly be, we will come for you. We or warriors like us will get the measure of you, you cold xenos filth, and that will be your ending.’

An alert sounded in the muster yard – a throbbing burr of a siren, from the depths of the Giant’s Coffin itself. As Culmonios descended the steps from the ramparts to join his Chapter brethren on the field of battle, he noticed that many of the assembled combat squads and serf security teams were pulling back towards the bastion.

A human gunner in the livery of the Scythes made to dash past him, but Culmonios caught her by the arm and spun her around. The conscripted woman’s hair was lank with cold sweat, and she wore a panicked expression that suited her better than her ill-fitting uniform.

‘What is happening, honoured servant?’ Culmonios barked, trying to take the edge off his usual gruffness. ‘Why has this new alert sounded?’

‘It’s the caves, my lord! The caves under the Coffin!’

She tried to break away, but he held her tightly by the wrist. ‘What about them? They were sealed up.’

‘No – the deep caves beneath the reactor level! The xenos could be coming right at this moment! There’s a way in, and those dirty natives didn’t tell us until it was too late!’ Tears welled up in the woman’s eyes. She still pulled at her caught arm, though it seemed a little less like she was trying to escape him as much as escape the dark ending she was now imagining for them all. ‘The... The First Company veterans... They... They are heading down to...’

Culmonios understood, then, and released her.

The small number of veterans armed and armoured as Terminators, that Master Thorcyra had kept stationed at the bastion – they could fight at close quarters like no other warriors of the Chapter. Led by Thorcyra himself in the absence of the late First Captain Dragos, they could hold the cramped caves against a whole host of xenos, if this indeed was to become a battle on *three* fronts instead of just two.

But Terminators would need practical assistance to get down into the

caves, and quickly. Thankfully, it seemed that there was no shortage of volunteers.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## NO GOOD PLACE

With grim inevitability, the ground penetrating augurs and bio-scanners carried by the veterans of First Company began to detect movement beneath the surface of Miral Prime. It was impossible to say whether or not the xenos had infested the natural caves, cracks and crevices after first making planetfall, or if they had followed the fleeing Mirali natives once the invasion was already well under way. No one, no Chapter brother or human retainer of the Scythes, had thought to delve too deeply under the Giant's Coffin itself. Solid rock had, after all, always seemed to be the sturdiest of foundations upon which to build anew. It was a symbolic truth as old as the oldest human civilisation.

But this rock was far from solid. In that, the similarities between noble Sotha and savage Miral were becoming more than philosophical, and steadily greater than mere wistful metaphor.

The foundations of the mesa lay well below ground level, plunging into the phreatic levels beneath the local water table, perhaps some unseen natural reservoir. After the Mirali had begun to intrude into the sublevels of the bastion unannounced, Master Thorcyra had ordered his warriors to investigate and secure the network of tunnels. Although it first seemed that the handful of Terminators in their bulky Tactical Dreadnought

armour were not up to the task after all – being too large to scrape more than a few metres into the narrowest of the cracks – it soon became apparent that this worked both ways. The superior tyrannid bio-forms, anything larger than the various gaunt genera, would be unable to use them either.

At least, that was the hope.

It was a curious tale, that of the Giant's Coffin in Mirali myth. Supposedly the burial site of some unknown race from the stars, it was steeped in allegory so vague that the meaning was now lost to the oral tradition of the tribes. Even so, it would not have surprised the veteran squads if they *had* happened upon oversized, humanoid skulls or phantime-like thigh bones littering the deepest spaces beneath the rock.

Instead, the Space Marines encountered a handful more natives down there. Most were wounded, all were running scared. It was a strange thing to see such wily and savage hunters in such a panic, and no warrior of the Chapter could easily imagine the mortal peril they had endured to escape the horrors that pursued them.

After that, they found only the dead. Those too weak to reach the hidden places of supposed sanctuary in the mesas, or those who had become trapped in the tightest underground spaces as they tried to force their way through.

Even so, movement was detected. It began in the lowest of the flooded crevices, the dark, icy water churning and roiling, the stale odour of warm bodies gone cold carried with it.

Then came the rippers. The segmented carrion feeders rose like a second tide from beneath the waters, having squirmed and writhed their way through the smallest of spaces towards the promise of battle and dead biological fodder beneath the Coffin.

The Scythes dispatched the creatures in short order, cleaving them apart with blades or stamping them into the rock beneath armoured boots. When the numbers became too great, flamer-wielding battle-brothers purged the crevices with gouts of blazing promethium.

Knowing then that the routes were traversable by those smart enough to find the true path, or those numerous enough to infest every *possible* way, the Chapter Master pulled his warriors back to form a cordon. There was no time to consider the building of barricades, nor any sense in risking

sapping the walls on the surface by deploying demolition charges to seal the caves beneath them. As above, so below – the warriors of First Company established their kill-zones and awaited the xenos rising from the depths.

But where Thorcyra deferred to Culmonios as the commander of the bastion on the surface, here he was possessed of a new and fierce resolve. Finally he would lead from the front, himself, and the hateful rhetoric he employed was quite at odds with his words and actions of recent weeks. The former Warden of the Pharos became a skull-faced reaper, intent on murder and vengeance.

In less than an hour, the first warrior-forms came scuttling out of the darkness, to be met by storm bolter and power scythe.

Up on the mesa, the outer gates of the bastion shook. The adamantium reverberated with each colossal impact, the hydraulic locking mechanisms groaning in their armoured mountings.

‘Bring them down!’ Culmonios bellowed to his brethren on the walls, to anyone who could heft a weapon heavy enough to do the job. ‘Block the way with their carcasses!’

There were a dozen armoured corpses on the ramparts, the golden yellow of their livery burned almost to match the black, and twice again that number of slain mortals. Three times now, the winged and leaping broods had gained a fleeting foothold somewhere along the battlements only to be cast back by the sheer desperation of the defenders, but it was only a matter of time before they claimed the walls for good. The tyrannid hordes were beyond number, beyond reckoning, and the long Mirali night was their ally. Stranger and larger bio-forms, hinting at ever more esoteric battlefield roles, had been spotted moving among them.

Those Space Marine Devastators who still lived were too few even to stem the tide, and Culmonios would not commit any of the Tactical or Assault reserves to ground that he already knew was lost.

Not that it would likely matter. The gates themselves were on the verge of falling.

The great carnifex besiegers battered against them, raking the reinforced ferrocrete of the barbican with their powerful limbs. One of the brutes, screened by its lesser kin, had thundered into the gates at the forefront of

their initial juggernaut charge, pounding at the metal like a sparring opponent before concerted multi-melta fire from the walls had slain it. With an eerie, unsettling calmness, two more had dragged the immense body out of the way before reverting back to their frenzied assault.

Even as Culmonios drew his bolt pistol, a pair of thickly armoured claws gripped the tops of the gates, the beast hauling its own ungainly weight clean off the ground in a renewed attempt to yank and drag them open. All the while, its broodmate struck at the mountings again and again with those wrecking ball fists.

The adamantium of the gates shrieked as they began to buckle. One hydraulic line tore, spraying pressurised fluid over the lintel.

The commander hefted his tyranid skull-shield, keeping his eyes fixed on the slowly widening gap between the two halves of the gate. He could see the tusked snout of the hanging carnifex as it snuffled and bellowed in its exertion, and hear the howls of the gathering beasts beyond.

‘Brother Scythes!’ he called out, bringing himself to a guarded crouch. ‘This is the final hour!’ Behind him, and to his left and right on the improvised barricades in the muster yard, his battle-brothers stood with their own weapons ready.

Further up the bastion – all the way to the topmost ramparts beneath the skyshield, where the great battle standard still flew in symbolic defiance of the Kraken – men and women who had pledged their lives to the Chapter stood ready to die alongside the warrior-giants they served.

It was the most perfect expression of the Sotharan ideal.

And, to the sorrow of all, it existed only in this one, fleeting moment before the end.

Culmonios glanced quickly over the bone crest of his shield, to where Sergeant Angeloi knelt with his bolter trained on the gates. They shared a brief nod of respect.

‘Honoured servants,’ he called out again. ‘As bastion commander of the Giant’s Coffin, I urge you – do not fear the alien, but *hate* the alien! And *kill* the alien!’

There were no cheers from the serfs. Only the hungry cries of the xenos echoing out over the mesa, and the clanks of the interceptor cannons tracking back and forth along the wall-tops.

A spore mine struck the battlements to the left of the gate, the acid-cloud

explosion hurling three of the last Devastators from their footing. One struck the barbican rampart so hard that the fuel tank of his heavy flamer ruptured in a cascading torrent of fire. Another was flipped bodily over the wall to the waiting jaws of the xenos.

None of the three Space Marines screamed for long.

Culmonios let his voice fall. He was no leader.

‘And, oh my battle-brothers,’ he murmured, ‘we cannot hope to survive this. So fight hard. For Sotha.’

The carnifex tugged hard on the left gate, and the metal sheared from its locks. The beast dropped with it, landing with an earth-shaking crash on the pulped tyrannid remains that carpeted all of the bastion approach.

A millisecond of apparent confusion crossed the two besieger-beasts’ alien features, as they tried to understand what was expected of them next. Then the clawed brute drew in a great lungful of air, preparing to roar in triumph.

A full salvo of missiles from the Whirlwind launchers struck it in rapid succession, and the creature was obliterated almost instantly.

The barbican itself disappeared in the flurry of cataclysmic detonations. So too did every other living xenos beast within fifty paces of it. Burning debris rained down the slope of the mesa, revealing all the hordes of the Kraken’s children by the glare of the bastion searchlights.

At this sight, an augmitter-filtered voice screamed out from further away in the muster yard.

*‘Brothers! Be the blade!’*

Then this time-honoured battle-cry of the Chapter’s Assault contingents was lost beneath the roar of igniting jump packs.

With the Scythes of the Emperor outnumbered by many thousands to one, there was little chance of anything more than a bloody fight to the death, and futile martyrdom. But they had already come to understand a little more of the hive mind’s cold, calculating mien, and they knew that the one thing likely to outwit it, at least temporarily, was a completely irrational and irredeemably *human* decision.

And so, the Scythes of the Emperor attacked the xenos first.

Three full Assault squads leapt over their brethren towards the ruin of the outer gates, and into the bloody carnage beyond. Their chainswords and power blades whined as they closed with the bewildered xenos creatures,

launching a desperate melee – pistols and blades against the razor-sharp claws and weapon analogues.

Here, behind the gaunts and the hunter-slayers, were revealed the *true* tyranids.

The warriors in crimson and ochre. The crested killers.

Towering over even the armoured giants of the Chapter, they were drawn to the challenge of greater combat like fire wasps to sweet, bruised fruit. They struck with swords of chitin and lashwhips that cleaved through battleplate, flesh and bone alike. They roared their hatred of all life as they brought festering mitts of purulent flesh to bear, jolt-showering their opponents at close range with ravenous, burrowing worms that chewed deep.

The Scythes were hungry too – they hungered for their long-denied vengeance.

Whether the tyranids even understood the concept, or the reason for it, was immaterial. They fell to point-blank bolt pistol fire, or with their heads struck from their shoulders by curved falx blades, or hauled to the ground and cleaved open by the teeth of shrieking chainswords. Curses and invective filled the air between the alien howls and cries of human agony.

But this valiant counter-assault could not last. The simple arithmetic of battle was against the Scythes, and they had all known it from the moment that they had sworn their final oaths and added their voices to the most sombre battle-hymns.

In a little under ninety seconds, the three squads were reduced to a handful of warriors left standing. Those who could fired their jump packs and leapt clear, making for the relative safety of the bastion walls, casting remorseful glances back at the dead and wounded battle-brothers they had left behind.

Culmonios steeled himself. He had given this order once before, and grappled with the sickening, tragic weight of it ever since.

‘They’ve taken the bait,’ he cried into the vox. ‘Open fire! Hit them again!’

The Whirlwinds loosed another flurry, rocking back on their track wheels as they emptied their missile racks completely. Two of the warheads struck the rubble of the barbican, but the rest found their mark, obliterating the scene of the melee in an instant and curtailing the tyranids’ short-lived

victory out on the mesa.

Those wounded Scythes would not suffer the ignominy of desecration or devourment by the Kraken, blasted into the hereafter along with their foes instead. Culmonios was thankful for that, at least.

Brother Nimeon, forming up as part of a field-combined Tactical combat squad, chambered a round in his boltgun. ‘Oh, commander,’ he said over the vox-link, ‘you really kicked the hornet’s nest that time.’

The Kraken’s children were enraged. Those shrieking creatures that could spring back to their feet left the more grievously wounded behind for the ripper swarms, and surged forwards again in even greater numbers. There had ceased to be any semblance of broods – the enemy was now, simply, an amorphous horde.

There was too little time to reload the Whirlwinds for another barrage. The Militarum artillery carriages had run dry. This final, bitter engagement would be fought with bolter and chainsword, to the ruin of all.

Culmonios roared. The order scarcely needed to be spoken out loud.

‘Brothers – *fire at will!*’

The Scythes opened up as the xenos came on. It was impossible to miss – they were as a wall of sinuous bodies and glinting claws, crushed together by their weight of numbers. The blaze of ordered bolter drill was a wonder of Chapter discipline, putting a hail of mass-reactives into the foremost targets to slow those behind.

But there were too many. A hundred times too many. A thousand, even.

The first line of the horde crashed over the remains of the walls. Some beasts came in too furiously, too quickly, tumbling and cartwheeling as they lost their agile footing. It was like watching ocean breakers on the rocky shores of Sotha.

The interceptor cannons opened up. The Techmarines had disabled the safety mechanisms that prevented the quad-turrets from traversing too far towards the ground, allowing the gunners to re-aim them at and over the bastion walls. Flak shells made short work of spore pods and isolated beasts in the sky, but on the massed horde their effect was positively catastrophic. Each dark, staccato burst turned flesh and chitin into bloody mist, felling scores more with jagged micro-shrapnel.

And each gun fired over two hundred shells a minute.

And still, the xenos were too many. It barely even thinned their numbers.

Culmonios realised that he was running forwards, a wordless battle-cry roaring from deep within his chest. He and a dozen others had vaulted the barricade, racing to meet the horde and firing his pistol without aiming. He had fought to keep his murderous rage down for so long that he almost did not recognise himself, now that it was unleashed once more – the warrior he became in the grip of that rage was someone else altogether, and neither of them would leave Miral Prime alive.

He threw his pistol and thumbed the activation stud on his chainsword. The blade howled into life, though the sound was lost completely beneath the din.

Culmonios crashed headlong into the foe. At the last second he had had the presence of mind to bring his skull-crested shield up, and that was likely the only reason that he was not instantly dashed to the floor like so many of his brethren. He swung his blade in a lethal arc, felling two of the xenos abominations and opening the belly of a third.

But there was no room to turn the weapon back. The press of oncoming bodies was too thick. He felt them slamming blindly into his side, edging him around as they passed.

Teeth. Blade-limbs. The stench of spoiled meat.

He cried out in frustration as his left knee buckled beneath the torrent.

Around him was nothing but white noise.

A sharp pain lanced into his hip as a slashing claw happened to pierce his war-plate seals, but the lucky creature was already gone before he could react.

Then something heavier crashed into his chest, and he fell.

Beneath the feet of the enemy, he expected to be torn apart almost instantly.

But he was not. He was overrun, dragged along the ground unknowingly by the horde. He could feel the dusty ferrocrete of the muster yard scraping against his armour.

The dead weight of a tyranid body tumbled onto his chest, rolling with the tide and knocking the wind from his lungs. He couldn't even tell if the creature was alive or not. He kicked hard and the body shifted, smothering his face and pushing the back of his head into the ground.

Culmonios thrashed reflexively, trying to dislodge it, but lost his grip on the chainsword's hilt. It was gone in an instant.

Teeth sank into his splayed shield arm, above the elbow. He tried to cry out for aid from his battle-brothers, but couldn't find his breath. Blood was running inside his armour.

He felt helpless. Swallowed up by things moving faster than he could follow.

Unpleasant memories of the fall of Sotha came to him then, with a sickening clarity.

*He remembered the faces of the civilians who reached up to him from the crush at the fortress-monastery's gates, and the panic in their eyes when they realised that their faith in their guardians had been thoroughly misplaced. The Great Devourer was a living tide that had washed over the plains of the home world, and broke against the foothills of the mountains with irresistible force...*

Trampled and forgotten beneath the tread of his foes, not unlike the millions of Sothans they had abandoned to similar fates, a thought occurred to Culmonios in that moment.

If this was how he was going to die, after everything that he had survived, then it seemed a hollow and pointless ending indeed – though perhaps entirely fitting.

Out in the void, far from the orbit of Miral Prime, the fabric of reality shivered.

Such a phenomenon would have set the long-range sensors of any Imperial ship to a clamour, tuned as they were to keep watch for disturbances or anomalous movement between the material universe and the empyrean. For a species whose domination of the galaxy had relied upon the manipulation of that other-realm for millennia, it was vital that human voidfarers at least be able to perceive it in some rudimentary manner, be that through warp-sensitive gene mutation or by virtue of the auspex.

The tyranids did not perceive the immaterium as mankind had taught itself to. The shadow cast by Hive Fleet Kraken in the warp was disruptive and unpredictable where psychically sensitive minds were concerned, but the xenos had little interest when their chosen prey were notably absent.

Thus did the hive ships spread throughout the Miral System remain completely ignorant of this apparently unremarkable ripple in the cosmos,

and what was to follow. In these earliest days of what would eventually become known as the Second Tyrannic War, when the splinter fleets had already outwitted countless Imperial forces *including* the noble Scythes of the Emperor, this was the first time that they, in turn, were themselves outwitted.

For where the xenos adapted and learned from their prey, so too had their prey been forced to adapt in response.

The shadow in the warp had robbed the Scythes of their Navigators and astropaths, forcing them to undertake an endless series of meticulously calculated blind warp jumps in order to move their warships from system to system. Slowly, patiently, the Chapter's shipmasters had worked their way back to Miral.

Across the system's interior, well inside the noted Mandeville point, nine separate and strategically placed warp rifts opened simultaneously.

Only then did the hive ships become aware of their killers.

By that time, they were already undone.

Only with the most tremendous effort of body and mind was Culmonios able to rise. The tangle of limbs – some living and deadly, others dead and limp – dragged at his battleplate, slowing his combat reflexes.

Wiping cold alien blood from his eyes, he spun around with his shield held out, catching the sweeping talons of a tyrannid warrior and turning them aside. The creature's momentary confusion at facing the polished bone visage of a brood-cousin bought Culmonios the instant he needed, to slam the shield's crest into its fanged snout. In one fluid motion he whipped out his combat blade and hamstringed the tottering xenos, before plunging the knife between its ribs, over and over again.

A snapping gaunt beast barrelled into him from the side, and they rolled together in the pile. Culmonios threw the thing back, then kicked its head around as it came at him again, and stamped down on its bared throat for good measure.

Two more tyrannid warriors howled at him from what was left of the nearest barricade. Bodies were slumped there – the armoured bodies of brother Scythes, their flesh burned away by acidic projectile shots. He raised the shield again to deflect the shots directed at him, before charging the barricade.

He fought without a plan, without any kind of strategy. He simply responded from moment to moment. He had been spared from death's embrace once more, though he knew that he surely danced with the reaper at every turn.

Death was close, now. He was merely challenging it to claim him, each time he confronted a new enemy.

‘Commander!’

The voice reached him through the fog of his own detached fury. He glanced up to see an Assault squad brother arcing down from the bastion's rampart towards him, the turbines of the warrior's jump pack blazing against the Mirali night sky.

The tyranids sensed him too. They tried to shoot him out of the air, but their powerfully venomous gun-analogues could not follow his trajectory quickly enough. The Space Marine landed squarely on the carpet of corpses and opened up with his plasma pistol, blowing one of the beasts almost in half with a shot to the abdomen. Culmonios knifed the second in the face, slashing again at its eyes before breaking its neck with his gauntleted hands and letting the body fall.

The fighting had spread out across the whole of the open bastion; everywhere inside the perimeter walls was a tyranid-choked battleground. From the upper ramparts, armed serfs fired down into the skirmish under the guidance of the remaining Astra Militarum gun crews, though wary of accidentally striking their transhuman masters instead of the foe. Two of the interceptor cannons still fired into the hordes pushing for the ruined outer gates, though it could only be a matter of time before their magazines were finally emptied.

Presumably, the First Company Terminators under Master Thorcyra's command were still engaged against the infiltrating xenos in the tunnels, but communications had been sketchy and incomplete from beneath the rocky foundation of the mesa even before Culmonios had lost his vox-bead in the crush.

The bastion commander hoped that Brother Keltru was still at his post, coordinating this ‘defence’, such as it was – the Chapter's defiant, tactical suicide.

Not that the crippled warrior could have got far, even if he wasn't.

Culmonios snatched up a dropped falx from the ground, and turned to

salute his jump-packed ally, just in time to see him speared through on the metres-long mantis talons of a hulking carnifex. The dying warrior cried out, choking blood through his helmet grille as he tried to raise his pistol, but the great beast shucked him aside in a splatter of gore before rounding on Culmonios.

Three more of them lumbered through the ruined gates. One still smouldered across its thick carapace where it had evidently been set alight with burning promethium. Another dragged the remains of a ruined gun-analogue behind it, lacking anthropomorphic hands to drop a damaged weapon as any other warrior might in the heat of battle. Like pack hunters, they bellowed and snapped at one another even as they circled Culmonios and his remaining brethren fighting on against the xenos horde at ground level.

The commander raised his shield and falx.

‘So, I finally got your attention, then,’ he spat, fancying that he addressed the abstract sentience of the hive mind itself. ‘Which one of you wants to try first?’

The nearest carnifex roared over the fray, so loud that Culmonios felt it in his own chest. Then the roar became a grating scream, and he realised that he had heard this terrible sound before – the telltale glow of bio-plasma began to rise in the thing’s chest, flaring with growing intensity between its exoskeletal ribs.

He would not run. Even if he did, there was nowhere to hide from this death anyway.

But Culmonios felt a sudden itching in his mind: a throbbing, burning hiss that never quite reached his ears. The carnifex began to quake, its scream becoming more forced.

The others howled and shrieked, staggering sideways and thrashing their heads from side to side. Whatever it was, they could feel it too.

The screaming beast fell forwards onto its digitigrade knees, trying to push itself upright with those blood-slick, bladed arms. Its mouth was clamped shut, its teeth cracking under the titanic pressure of its jaws, even though the bio-plasma still blazed and roiled in its gullet.

Its throat split.

Purple flames erupted forth, spilling down its torso and setting the ground beneath it ablaze. The monster convulsed, toppling forwards,

shuddering as it died.

The hissing in Culmonios' mind eased. He turned at the sound of steady, armoured boot falls behind him.

It was Spiridonas.

The Librarian's eyes were purest black, almost burning with psionic intensity. A frosty aura surrounded him, sending the lesser tyranids scurrying from his path.

'Brother Culmonios...' he said, his voice unnaturally resonant and laden with alien malice. 'The Kraken knows your name. It would devour you in an instant. I have felt its undying hunger in my own gut...'

The other carnifexes were becoming more agitated by the psyker's presence. They stumbled back and forth, apparently unsure how best to attack him.

'I can hold them off, but not for long. You must go.'

The burned beast lunged forwards, bellowing as it came. Spiridonas whirled around with his force staff aimed like a spear, and he hurled a fulgent arc of bio-lightning that broke the creature's spine. It fell, dead, the momentum of its charge sending it skidding past him, and he turned those sinister black eyes towards Culmonios again.

'You must go,' he said again. 'You will be needed.'

The Librarian began to move forwards, raising his arms slowly as he went. In his right hand he held the staff outstretched while the left flickered with a telekinetic haze, and he put himself between the remaining two carnifexes, directing them back. They seemed reluctant to come any closer, and yet were uncompelled to obey his empathic commands outright – Culmonios realised that even Spiridonas was unsure of the extent of his own abilities, and that this level of mind control was likely beyond him.

Still keeping his guard up and his attention focused on the hissing beasts, Culmonios edged away from the Librarian. 'This death is as good as any other,' he murmured. 'We are all going to die here, anyway.'

The Librarian shook his head. 'No, brother. The shadows are here but, for those who remain untouched by them, there may yet be some glimmer of hope. Our Chapter's salvation is at hand.'

Sirens sounded from the bastion ramparts, even as the Scythes of the Emperor continued to fight what they had truly, *truly* believed, with every

fibre of their beings, would be their final battle. Brother Keltru's voice echoed over the vox-horns at every level across the mesa.

*'We have incoming vessels, brothers! The Heart of Cronus is here!'*

It was news that Bastion Commander Culmonios never thought he would live to hear. He found it hard to know quite how to react. At some level, he realised that he had never truly expected Captain Thracian to return.

He was not alone in that. While many of the mortal serfs cried out in ecstatic joy and redoubled their efforts in the defence, his Chapter brothers were still fighting with a kind of grim and reckless abandon.

This still most definitely had the feel of a last stand.

And yet, Thracian had come back to them. Just as he had pledged.

Was it victory over the tyranids that Culmonios desired, he wondered, or vengeance and death? Could he purge his soul of grief for the loss of Sotha by sacrificing himself in combat with the Kraken? Or could he simply not stand the idea of living with that same grief for the rest of his transhuman life?

Was he in fact trying to escape a future of conservative action and rebuilding all that the Chapter had lost? That was no kind of existence for one of the Emperor's own, humbled by failure. The shame weighed heavily, even now – how much greater would it be once word spread beyond the other worlds of the Sotharan League, to the Imperium at large?

The Scythes of the Emperor would be *pitied*. Their names would become merely a footnote in the history of mankind's bloody wars against the xenos.

Culmonios could not live like that. He didn't want to.

And yet still he could not allow his Chapter to die.

He roared in frustration, blinking hard, trying to bring himself back into the moment. He would just fight on, and fight hard, for as long as he was able. The damned Kraken didn't seem up to the task of killing him, anyway.

He looked back to Spiridonas, and was surprised to see that the Librarian had sunk to his knees before the closer of the two carnifexes. It had become very still, no longer huffing and growling at the psyker's presence. Its fanged maw was closed, though it gusted hot, drooling breaths between its teeth so forcefully that they caused Spiridonas' oath papers to rustle. As Culmonios looked on, he nonetheless felt ephemeral waves of calmness

emanating from the exchange, the man and the monster connected at some primal level as each stared into the eyes of the other.

Had the warp-touched lunatic actually found some way to *tame* the beasts?

The other carnifex thought not.

It lashed out with the trailing remains of its bio-weapon and struck the Librarian in the side of the head, sending him sprawling across the fouled ferrocrete. Before his force staff had even clattered to the ground, the entrancement was broken and the monster was released – it snatched up his armoured body in its claws, and bit through the top of the screaming Space Marine's skull.



# CHAPTER TWELVE

## SLAUGHTER

Thracian's own hearts sank when he set eyes upon the tiny orb of Miral Prime. With the blackness of the void as its backdrop, even at this distance he could see that the rich, atmosphere-mottled greens of the surface were discoloured. They now had a diseased, ruddy hue to them, particularly towards the polar regions.

Surely, he told himself, this could not be the first stages of planetary assimilation. The tyrannids had not had anywhere near enough time...

'Lieutenant Hannelore,' he called out from the command throne, 'tell my brothers at the Coffin to send us all the tactical data they have on the hive ships. Anything that can help us against these abominations. We will target them one at a time, if we have to.'

The serf-lieutenant stood as ever at the secondary command station. She checked the signal array. 'They are transmitting now, my lord. I have a Brother Keltru on the comm – he is communicating with the rest of the defence forces, although the Militarum outpost on Miral Two has been completely abandoned.'

'Not overrun by the xenos, then?'

'No. It seems that the survivors on board the *Atreides* were exaggerating somewhat, after the fleet fled the system piecemeal.'

Thracian did not reply. The battle-barge was at full alert, the crew ready for the coming attack. The other Chapter vessels had begun to swing into line around the *Heart of Cronus*, with the *Laodameia's Lament* and the *Pale Rider* now flanking her forward approach. The *Nova Prospectum*, far smaller than the rest, powered on in their wake. Hannelore had proven more than just a capable executive officer for one ship, and now simultaneously coordinated the small battle group almost as easily as she commanded her own bridge crew.

The captain looked to the oculus. Aside from the three tyrannid vessels in high orbit over Miral Prime, those that had hounded the rest of the fleet until they jumped beyond the system-edge were spread in a loose cluster with their spawn flotillae surrounding them. They had not been unwary enough, it seemed, to stray into the mined debris fields that Thracian had left as Miral's first perimeter defence, though two of the hive ships had apparently begun to lay traps of their own in the days since. Clusters of fleshy spore mines the size of super-heavy tanks hung in the void around the Mandeville point, with anemone-like tendrils that twitched in the frozen vacuum, seeking the iron touch of a careless craft's hull.

If they had emerged from the warp there, the ships of Thracian's mismatched battle group would surely have been destroyed. It was a tactic that their recently gathered intelligence suggested had already been employed by other splinters of Hive Fleet Kraken, across the segmentum.

New ident tags appeared in the hololithic overlay. Hannelore took note.

'Hive ship designations have been updated again, captain. Our primary targets are now known to the Chapter as #51845 *Maleph*, #80827 *Dygebe* and #24106 *Ziru*.'

Thracian snorted. 'Three devils of old. Let us slay them. Signal the attack.'

The battle group surged forwards, spreading out to present a less obvious target to the enemy. *Maleph* and *Ziru* surrounded themselves with the swarms of their own making, seeming to understand that this would force their human attackers to run a dangerous gauntlet if they were to reach them in battle.

The vast monstrosity *Dygebe*, however, clawed itself away from the approaching warships and made instinctively for the heat of the Miral star.

Perhaps it sensed in the newcomers a level of threat that the others did

not, or perhaps this was simply a craven act of xenos cowardice in the face of an outwardly superior enemy. But while many of the lesser bio-ships managed to keep pace with their parent, *Dygebe*'s flight left the larger support organisms struggling to come about and keep pace with the rest, and they floundered before the *Heart*'s approach.

Hannelore opened a vox-channel to the other eight ships in the battle group.

'*Lament, Rider* – with me,' she commanded. 'We will take the hive ship. All other vessels, form up on the *Nova Prospectum*. Blaze me a path through that swarm.'

Their shipmasters responded, confirming the order. Hannelore looked to Thracian, and the captain knew what she was waiting for.

He nodded.

'Very good, my lord,' she said. 'Forge Master Sebastion – you are cleared for deployment of nucleonic warheads. *Heart* bridge – shields keyed to the front arcs, helm all ahead full, gunnery stations to prepare for full assault on target eight-zero-eight-two-seven.'

The void lit up as the batteries established an engagement zone around the battle-barge and her escorts, creating a deadly and near-impassable wall of shell detonations some two kilometres out. Such a barrage could flay an unshielded enemy cruiser, but its true purpose was in keeping the smaller, fighter-level craft from threatening the battle-barge's critical systems at close range.

The acceleration of the grand ship was ponderous at first but soon gained pace, the two smaller Nova-class frigates matching it rather than racing ahead. They pulled in tighter, closing the formation to around fifteen hundred metres between vessels, and proximity alarms began to sound, the interface of void shields casting rainbow silhouettes of conflicting energy along their hulls.

As they powered on, their target slid into view.

*Dygebe*.

'I have a confirmed target lock, on...' the Master of Ordnance began, but quickly faltered. 'Well, I don't know what it's locked on *to*, on that xenos horror, but it's locked on. Transmitting to the Novas for their triangulation.'

'Open fire!' Thracian roared. 'Full nucleonic strike!'

The *Heart of Cronus* loosed a stream of specially loaded macro-shells from its bombardment cannon. Less than a heartbeat later, the *Laodameia's Lament* and the *Pale Rider* fired their forward lances in unison, cleaving into the hindquarters of the fleeing hive ship. The great beast convulsed, already wallowing in agony when the first of the bombardment shells struck its spine.

These were not ordnance of even the extraordinarily destructive kind most often deployed by the Adeptus Astartes. They were, instead, one of the many weapons that Thracian had charged Sebastion to retrieve from the Chapter's hidden caches in order to strike back at the Kraken. As Master of the Arsenal, Captain Thracian had followed the example of his predecessors and bargained often for access to scarce and esoteric technologies of war – irradiation cleansers, ancient Martian beam weapons, specialised bombardment payloads and even some of the more exotic and proscribed forms of Exterminatus-grade terrors.

These were hellish tools of war, forbidden except under the most dire of circumstances and even then only with the highest of mandates. They were a deterrent, hardly ever intended for use; for they were exceedingly rare, the secrets of their manufacture often lost to the grim darkness of the distant past, or closely guarded by the Adeptus Mechanicus and shared with no one.

And once such rare weapons had been spent, they were a deterrent no longer.

So it was that Thracian and his predecessors had accrued quite an arsenal, over the centuries. It was useful to know that a forge world might offer a shipment of nucleonic macro-shells in exchange for surreptitious support from a Space Marine Chapter in an ongoing border dispute with a rival.

And Thracian possessed a gift for solving problems, in the long term.

The warhead detonated, the blinding white flash enough to sear the retinas of anyone who might have foolishly looked upon it directly. It blasted a fifth of *Dygebe's* organic bulk in an instant, setting the hive ship into an uncontrolled spiral. Two more shells struck home, setting the hulk aflame and poisoning its flesh with extreme doses of radiation, while the Nova frigates continued to spear it with their ship-hunting lance lasers.

By the time the fourth shell found its mark, *Dygebe* was already dead.

Cheers went up across the bridge of the *Heart*, and over the vox.

Emboldened by the kill, the *Nova Prospectum* paused in its massacre of the swarm-beasts and took on the entrenched *Ziru* directly.

Forge Master Sebastian appeared as a hololithic avatar in front of the battle-barge's main oculus. '*Second tyranid hive ship destroyed, captain.*'

Thracian laughed. 'So I heard, brother,' he replied. 'That was quite a bang.'

*'There were multiple detonations. We attacked the spore mine clusters first, so that the target would become disoriented. But you could not have heard them at all, in hard vacuum.'*

'Yes, I was... Never mind.' He closed the link. 'Lieutenant, marshal the battle group to reform. Let us dispatch the third hive ship as quickly as possible, and mop up the dregs.'

The hint of a smile creased the corner of Hannelore's mouth. 'With pleasure, my lord.'

Thracian looked back to the ravaged world of Miral Prime in the oculus view, and the rest of the splinter fleet gathered there to feed. His fleeting levity was gone again.

'Tell this Brother Keltru to advise Master Thorcyra that we are coming to help evacuate the Giant's Coffin from orbit,' he said. 'We go in hard, we go in fast. We send in our drop-ships and what martial strength we can muster. But we absolutely must take out those hive ships – severing the synapse link should throw the tyranid forces on the ground into complete disarray. We are the Chapter's only chance.'

Against all odds, the Scythes of the Emperor down on the mesa pushed the xenos invaders back once more. Though they no longer fought in ordered companies and squads but as pockets of united *survivors*, by blade and boltgun, falx and flamer, they had prevailed. The few remaining gunships had been recalled to the bastion, ready to time their arrival to coincide precisely with those from the *Heart of Cronus* and her battle group. Rapid aerial assaults had been identified as the key to victory.

Bleak sights had been reported, out there in the continental jungle and across the far side of the planet where the Chapter no longer had any dominion – the sickeningly familiar signs suggesting that the mechanisms of tyranid assimilation were already at work. Great depressions that would go on to form reclamation pools more than ten kilometres wide. Water

courses choked by strange overgrowth, though the trees had lost all their foliage. The chewed-resin and chitin constructions that would eventually evolve into feeder towers that pierced the heavens.

Birds were no longer heard on Miral Prime. The only land sharks were corpses dragged to the surface and stripped of flesh by the growing ripper swarms.

But this invasion was a strange and abnormal thing, for those who professed any knowledge or experience of the Great Devourer. Its processes were chaotic, random and, at times, self-defeating.

If this was a conscious tactic of the hive mind, what had prompted it to change its aeons-old habits so drastically?

Culmonios did not care to know. He was done with trying to understand this war.

With Thracian coordinating a monumental counter-strike in orbit and over the Coffin, it seemed as though they might actually have a chance at last. Runners had been sent to convey the news to Master Thorcyra's veteran force fighting below ground, out of signal range. The caves and crawlspaces were choked with dead tyranids and fallen Scythes, to such an extent that the xenos had apparently given up trying to force their way through, but still the Chapter Master would not leave anything to chance. The few remaining Terminators of First Company had pulled back to the lower levels of the bastion itself, forming a stronger perimeter and allowing Thorcyra to return to the surface.

Dawn's first light was paling the sky to the east when he emerged from the bastion interior with the last three warriors of his honour guard. His cloak was ragged, his armour filthy with dried xenos blood, and he carried his immense power scythe wearily over one shoulder. Though the heavier cannons and artillery had long fallen silent, the air over the muster yard crackled with the aegis of the skyshield, and gunfire echoed strangely beneath it from the new front lines.

Slowing only to reprimand two exhausted armoury serfs bearing a crate of ammunition and send them out to the warriors manning the newly established barricades beyond the perimeter, Culmonios strode towards his Chapter Master. He hailed him with a tense salute.

'My lord, it seems we may yet live through this,' he said.

Thorcyra removed his skull-helm, though his features were gaunt enough

still to be reminiscent of it. ‘We may, commander. The cost has been great, but we have punished the Kraken dearly. This has been the first step, a baptism of fire to mark our new beginning. We shall have vengeance, sooner rather than later. I will have every new battle-brother of the Scythes swear oaths of defiance against the xenos, until we have wiped them from the face of the galaxy once more.’

Culmonios let his shield rest upon the ground. It was much scarred by the battles he had fought. The killing of the carnifex that had ended Spiridonas had almost been the death of him too, but the sight of such a heroic combat had rallied the remnants of Fourth Company and allowed them to retake the ruins of the barbican from the horde.

And still, the Chapter standard flew from the bastion’s highest rampart.

‘Captain Thracian has begun his attack,’ Culmonios reported. ‘The hive ships *Rocola* and *Xeper* are in opposition on the far side of the planet, or at least far enough beyond the horizon that they could not easily come to *Jaduli*’s aid. He’s hitting the swarm with everything he has.’ The bastion commander gestured out beyond the mesa. ‘And after the hive ships, I suppose he’ll turn those mighty guns against the tyranids on the surface.’

‘Then let us make ready, brother. To the barricades!’

As the five of them made for the lines of battle out on the mesa, Culmonios opened a vox-channel to the command centre. ‘Brother Keltru, give me an estimate on the gunships from—’

He saw them too late. With his attention on the battle raging up ahead and the prospect of slaying countless foes at his Chapter Master’s side, he had not noticed the chameleonic shimmer in the shadows between the hulls of the abandoned Whirlwinds.

The two leaping hunters were upon them in an instant.

*Lictors.*

Culmonios cursed his own stupidity. These beasts had lain low when their kin were driven back from the bastion interior.

His hand went reflexively to his empty holster, then for the falx mag-locked to his thigh. In the milliseconds before his fingers closed around the grip, the first assassin-creature had already slashed the head from one of Thorcyra’s honour guard and swiped another unsuspecting warrior to the ground.

As it lunged for the Chapter Master’s unguarded back, Culmonios hurled

himself forwards with the xenos skull-crest shield held out before him.

Pain.

Blood.

He did not land as he had expected to. The breath was wrenched from his lungs by a jarring, agonised halt with his boots still half a metre off the ferrocrete. He kicked at empty space, but his chest was a riot of fiery agony that stole the fight out of him.

The lictor had skewered him on its mantis-like bladed forelimbs.

His breath would not come. He realised that all three of his lungs were open to the air through his torn breastplate. Vision greying, he tried to hack at the creature with his falx, but it slipped from his weak grasp. Blood rose up his throat, spilling down his chin. He had no strength left.

At the very least, though, he had given Thorcyra all the warning that the Chapter Master needed.

His ceremonial helm of office forgotten on the bloody ground, Thorcyra fought the second assassin-creature like the paragon of Adeptus Astartes warfare that he was, blade to blade and eye to eye. He met its scything talons with that great scythe of his own, always in motion, stepping to sweep and parry at ranges impossible with a shorter falx or chainsword. Though the lictor towered over him, Thorcyra roared as he barged it with his shoulder, then hooked the powered blade in behind its legs and cleaved them free in a welter of boiling xenos blood.

The creature howled, collapsing onto the stumps and toppling backwards.

But before it even hit the ground, the Chapter Master dashed one flailing blade-limb off at the shoulder and struck through its skull with the toe of the scythe.

The lictor holding Culmonios flexed its claws in agitation, hissing through the mass of quivering feeder tendrils around its mouthparts. It tried to shake the impaled warrior free as Thorcyra rounded on it. His blade was up and ready. Pure hatred of the xenos burned in his gaze.

This. This was a man to lead the Scythes of the Emperor.

But Bastion Commander Culmonios would not live to see it.

Gurgling in dim agony as he was dropped to the gore-slicked ferrocrete, he realised that he had never really considered what his final thoughts might be, when death eventually claimed him. Even if he had, he almost certainly would never have imagined that it would be nothing more than a

simple sense of relief, and mild regret that he had allowed his enemy to define him so.

Like so many of its splinter fleet kin before it, *Jaduli* was burning. It had proved more challenging a target than the others, in the upper reaches of the atmosphere and within the planetary gravity well, and several nucleonic shells had missed their mark and gone spiralling down to the planet's surface. Each exploded with megatonne force, but there was little of interest to the Chapter on Miral Prime now, other than the bastion at the Giant's Coffin itself.

Such collateral damage would only serve to tame the death world a little more.

Thracian rose from the command throne. He had realised very soon after returning to Miral that he preferred battle on the ground to battle in the void. He had no desire to lead a fleet. Once this was over and the day won, he would petition the Chapter Master again to find a more suitable candidate for the role.

The human signal-master spun around at his station, cupping his earpiece. 'My lord... I...' he stammered. 'I have Master Thorcyra. Priority one.'

The captain nodded. 'Put it up on the main projection.'

'The signal is vox only, my lord. Transferring to bridge address.'

Hannelore turned, concern written upon her face. She took a hesitant step towards the throne, the execution of *Jaduli* forgotten.

The vox-channel squealed as it cut in. The sounds of combat were clear.

'*Thracian! Can you hear me?*'

'I hear you, my lord. I—'

'*Strike them down, Thracian! Destroy them! Make them pay for all they have done to us!*'

'We are engaging the first hive ship and its swarm. Victory is assured. We will launch our drop-ships to reinforce you, and then move the battle group to engage seven-eight-one-one-four *Rocola* next. You should notice that the xenos forces on the ground will lose their coherency as a result.'

There was no answer. The channel was empty.

Thracian looked to the signal-master again. 'Re-establish contact.'

Horror spread over the man's features. His knuckles went white on the

earpiece.

‘The... The Chapter Master... He’s...’

Forge Master Sebastian’s voice came over the vox instead. ‘*Brother, I have received word from Giant’s Coffin command that Master Thorcyra has fallen. Can you confirm this?*’

Thracian gaped. It felt as if the deck were tilting beneath his feet.

‘What happened?’ he demanded, striding to the signal- master’s station. ‘I was just speaking to him. He can’t be dead. It’s a mistake.’

The serf was trembling. His face was drained of all colour. ‘The Coffin confirms,’ he mumbled. ‘Chapter Master Thorcyra has been slain by a tyranid assassin, along with his honour guard, and Bastion Commander Culmonios.’

‘Who?’ Thracian whispered, numbly.

Miral Prime hung in the oculus view, turning slowly beneath them. The location of the Giant’s Coffin, marked with golden identifier sigils, was cresting the horizon. Beyond, not yet close enough to give a meaningful sensor return, the outrider bio-vessels of *Rocola*’s swarm were just visible against the rising of the Miral star.

Captain Thracian, Master of the Arsenal and the Fleet, was now also the only remaining command-level officer of the Scythes of the Emperor Chapter.

‘Damn you, Hadrios,’ he murmured to himself, staring up at the display. ‘You’ve left me with no choice.’

He rounded on Lieutenant Hannelore.

‘We are leaving this savage place. Deploy the drop-ships immediately – I’m ordering the complete evacuation of the Miral System. We will regroup with the rest of the fleet, and break for the interstellar void. The hive ships won’t be able to catch us.’

Hannelore shifted uneasily. ‘Master Thorcyra’s final command was to strike back at the xenos, my lord.’

Thracian loomed over her. ‘And look where that got him,’ he growled.

The flights of Stormtalons and Fire Raptor gunships circled the mesa, blazing death at the xenos whenever they broke from cover. Concerted bombing from the air and precision lance fire from the battle group in orbit tore through the straggling broods in what remained of the jungle –

mostly now just scorched mud and the blackened stumps of trees amidst the bones of a million tyranids.

The refractor skyshield flickered, the projectors blowing out in showers of sparks as the power was cut. It was the only way to land the bigger Thunderhawks directly onto the bastion's landing platform, with all haste.

Besides, the safety of the bastion was of no concern now.

The surviving battle-brothers, a little over a battle company in number, had withdrawn to the lower ramparts, allowing their honoured servants to board the first of the evacuation craft. The Techmarine cadres steered the two empty Whirlwinds up to a waiting Thunderhawk transporter. They had hauled a handful of viable Rhinos and a Razorback out from the carnage beyond the ruined gates, but there was no drop-ship ready to bear them away – they would have to be left behind.

Then had come the Mirali aspirants, and what little remained of the armoury stores.

Meanwhile, the dead that could be found were stripped of everything that might be salvaged. Weapons. Armour. Ammunition.

Chapter Master Thorcyra, serene now in death, was laid upon a hastily constructed funeral pyre at the highest point of the mesa, stacked with the remains of many xenos beasts, including the lictor that had been his end. With the skull-mask of the Warden of the Pharos upon his breast, his body was commended to the hereafter in the ancient Sothan tradition.

Machaon had found the urgency of the evacuation unsettling, though he knew that disagreeable decisions would have to be made regarding the wounded. Where battlefield triage required the prioritisation of an Apothecary's attentions to the warriors most likely to survive, now he and his brethren had to assess whether or not a patient warranted a place on the drop-ships bound for orbit. Those who would require more complex care were euthanised, quietly, behind sound-baffling screens.

Space Marines yielded their gene-seed. Mortals received a prayer.

These bodies were also stripped.

The neophyte Esau, his missing eye bandaged for the time being, helped Machaon remove Sergeant Kalos' battleplate, stacking it into a transport crate and dragging it out to the landing platform. He too seemed to find the whole enterprise most distasteful, but he did as he was asked without question.

It was the gene-seed itself that warranted the most care and security.

Thracian had sent Sergeant Romonos, one of his most trusted, to retrieve the cryo-storage containers, but Machaon had insisted – practically at gunpoint – that he oversee the move himself, once everything else was done. Conferring with Thracian from the bridge of the *Heart of Cronus*, it had eventually been agreed, and Romonos' warriors had waited for the Apothecary out of a grudging courtesy and respect.

Now, moving the containers out to the waiting Thunderhawk, Machaon saw that they had also been appointed two Stormravens to fly escort, as he had insisted. This cargo was precious beyond all measure.

As the last of the medicae adepts boarded the drop-ship, two of the surviving veterans from First Company approached Romonos.

'What about the standard?' one of them demanded, pointing to the uppermost battlements. 'Are we not to retrieve that also?'

Romonos shook his head. 'It will remain, in honour of the fallen – Chapter Master Thracian would not leave their final resting place unmarked. Sotha is gone, now Miral Prime, and Master Thorcyra too. Let this serve as their memorial, before the end.'

It was symbolic. At some level, Machaon was impressed by that.

He turned, only to be confronted by the serf-adept Maderie. She looked unhappy.

'Where's the boy?' she demanded, shoving his armoured shoulder back towards the embarkation ramp with her weak, mortal hands. 'Where is he? You promised!'

Machaon sighed. 'Fine. I'll get him on the last transport.'

Stomping backwards down to the landing platform conveyor, he pointed at her accusingly.

'You are sentimental. That's no good in the apothecarion,' he called out. 'Stay with the containers. No one opens them up unless I am there, yes? Otherwise they'll answer to me. Tell them that. I don't care if it's Master Thracian himself – you tell him I said so.'

Hwygir was screeching again. The runty trog knew that he had almost been forgotten, still tied to the air circulation vent, so his unhappiness was understandable.

Machaon opened the door to the chamber, and winced at the sound.

‘Be quiet. I’m here. You’re lucky that Maderie remembered you.’

The boy glared at him, his eyes red and tearful, his wrists bloody from tugging at the restraints. He held them out defiantly. ‘Machaon, cut! Cut him sharp-rope!’

Machaon sighed again, and snapped the plastek with his gauntleted hands. ‘Move yourself, lad.’

The two of them ran along the empty corridors, back to the conveyor. They were the last living people in the bastion – though what *else* might yet be alive in the lower levels was not something that Machaon chose to dwell upon.

They emerged onto the platform, where a Storm Eagle waited with its engines hot. A single Chapter brother waited at the top of the ramp, fully and cleanly armoured, urging them to hurry. Evidently he was one of Thracian’s, stationed on the *Heart of Cronus* until now, no doubt.

But in spite of their haste, Hwylgir faltered, his bare feet stumbling to a halt on the hot metal plating of the deck. It was not at the sight of this fiery, iron bird that meant to carry him off into the sky, nor the dark, helmed reaper that beckoned the two of them towards it.

Rather, he stared out over the devastation of his home world. Aside from the circling gunships strafing the ground, the uncountable xenos corpses and burned, dusty landscape, on the eastern horizon there were towering alien silhouettes in the haze – feeder structures being agglomerated from the wreckage of *Heloth*, no doubt.

He began to sob softly again, his dirty hands trembling.

Stung by something like pity, Machaon knelt behind him and placed one immense hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Come on, lad,’ he said softly. ‘Don’t look back. You’ll get your chance for revenge against the Kraken. You and all the other orphans of dead worlds.’

The Apothecary did not see the knife blade. He only felt its hot sting as it was thrust in sideways through his throat, severing his windpipe, his carotid and jugular in one efficient movement. Blood sprayed over Hwylgir’s back, and the boy flinched away with a stifled cry of surprise.

Machaon clapped one hand to his torn neck seal in a vain attempt to stop the flow, while flailing blindly at his attacker with the other. He managed to turn and look up.

Brother Hadrios calmly removed his helm, and struck the dying

Apothecary across the temple with it, sending him sprawling to the floor. Then he stood calmly, watching the gush of thick, arterial blood spreading over the landing platform as Machaon twitched his last.

‘Apologies,’ he said, ‘but it is better this way. A kindness, even. It does not matter whether you know the truth or not – you would almost certainly attempt to interfere with what must happen next.’

Machaon choked out a few incoherent gurgles. The world was darkening around him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He had no voice. No voice to call out over the vox to his brothers making for orbit, nor even to warn young Hwyrir.

He cursed himself for not having spoken his true concerns about Hadrios to anyone before now. He could only hope and pray that maybe, *maybe*, Brother Keltru might just recall something of their previous, furtive conversation, when Machaon’s own name would be listed among those still missing after the Coffin’s evacuation...

Hadrios cocked his head. The gesture did not appear thoughtful so much as aping the *appearance* of being thoughtful.

‘You were too close to the Librarian. Do you see? I cannot be sure that you are not compromised.’ He turned to look at the horrified Mirali youth, who was slowly backing away from the grisly scene. ‘If we are to survive, then we have to be sure. And so I will deal with your medicae adepts in due course, and the cargo they bear.’

Machaon gritted his teeth, dark red drool running down his chin.

Then he fell still.

Still looking at Hwyrir, Hadrios put away his blade. ‘*Nadtai, kha mirt-ku,*’ he said in perfectly accented Mirali. ‘*Bi khatti garigin. Chama ik ghalak Master Thracian.*’

He took the dumbfounded boy by the hand, and led him to the last transport away from the Giant’s Coffin, leaving Miral Prime to the Kraken’s children.

The Heart of Cronus received the last of the returning drop-ships even as the brood-swarm vessels of *Rocola* began to probe the battle group’s defences. The Scythes ships were already under way, but now they lit their engines for true and sped away at full burn.

All except for the battle-barge itself.

Opening up the batteries to keep the swarms at arm's length, Thracian ordered one final attack to be launched.

Hannelore regarded him for a long moment before speaking. 'My lord, please confirm your order. I wish to have witnesses to it on the bridge.'

Thracian lowered himself into the command throne. He flexed his fingers over the armrests.

'Lieutenant Hannelore – as Chapter Master of the Scythes of the Emperor, I command you to enact Exterminatus upon Miral Prime. We will not claim this world, but nor will the Great Devourer.'

The order was queried and confirmed at every step of the process from the bridge to the gunnery trigger, as dictated by Imperial law. Such an extreme sanction could not be allowed to be carried out lightly. Cyclonic warheads were armed, the safety triggers removed.

The payload arced down through the early morning light over the ravaged mesa. Though it was possible that the hive ships *Xeper* and *Rocola* might have recognised these weapons for what they were and begun to pull away from the world's orbit, the tyrannid beasts on the ground had no comprehension of what they had been abandoned unto.

As the *Heart* sped after the rest of its battle group, her navigation officers running the hundreds of calculations necessary for an unguided warp jump, Miral Prime was blasted by a continental firestorm that spread the entire circumference of the globe in a matter of hours. Plasmic fires scoured every last trace of organic matter from the biosphere. Hurricanes of a thousand degrees and more levelled the terrain down to bare rock.

Finally, the planet grew cold.

To any untrained eye, it might as well have been devoured by the Kraken.

Registering a sense of something akin to disappointment, *Xeper* and *Rocola* moved on.



# EPILOGUE

## FOREWARNED, FOREARMED

Senator Julnor Baturbas had the most irritating habit of drumming his knuckles upon the wooden tabletop. Thracian had tried glaring at him with increasing amounts of venom each time he did it, but eventually gave up. The man was clearly an idiot.

As the audience in the *Heart of Cronus*' staterooms wound on into its third hour and a new sheaf of official-looking documents was spread out before him, Thracian found himself staring at the offending digits as they continued to tap out their absent rhythm. He counted fourteen wedding and betrothal rings, of varying design and ornamentation. Then he wondered if any of the senator's many wives had considered cutting off his fingers, over the years, after being forced to spend similar amounts of time listening to him talk.

'Brother-Captain Agaitas made us many promises,' the dishevelled man was saying, 'and your predecessor pledged to honour them all. We would like some assurance that you intend to uphold that same accord, now, as Chapter Master. As I'm sure you can appreciate, *I* need to make sure that the people of Sothara are not forgotten in their hour of greatest need.'

Thracian remained seated, his posture forced in order to feign attentiveness. This was what his existence threatened to become, in the

nine days since they had left Miral. He glanced over the scattered papers one last time, before fixing Baturbas with his weary eyes.

‘Is this what you think we do?’ he asked. ‘Rescue civilians from harm’s way?’

The senator looked from Thracian to the other representatives of the Chapter seated at the conference table. ‘I am quite sure that this is new territory for all of us, my lord.’

‘Indeed it is.’

Thracian rose slowly, pointedly, from his chair. He resisted the urge to slam his fists down into the polished wood, but instead flicked individual sheets of parchment aside with his fingertips as he spoke.

‘Senator Baturbas, what you are proposing changes the nature of our war against the Kraken entirely. The Scythes of the Emperor have no desire to govern the displaced peoples of our home world, but to grant you the autonomy you have requested within the fleet, well... Such a thing would be almost unprecedented within the strictures of Imperial law.’

Baturbas did not miss a beat. ‘On Sotha, we were the lawmakers, my lord,’ he said. ‘The Chapter allowed the senate to govern the people, and in turn the people served you. All that my learned friends and I seek is for that arrangement to be maintained, to the benefit of everyone involved. If the fleet is to function autonomously then it is the only way.’

Leaning forwards in his seat, Forge Master Sebastion seemed nonplussed. ‘But Sotha is gone. The senate is gone. Will the other worlds still even recognise your authority over them?’

‘With the xenos on their doorstep, my lord?’ the senator replied. ‘Oh, I’m willing to bet that they will. Even with the communications disruption growing across all five sectors, word of the invasion is spreading throughout the Sotharan League.’ He gestured to the documents on the tabletop, and the names of a dozen highlighted systems. ‘There is panic. The other worlds cry out to the noble Scythes for their deliverance.’

Gingerly placing a hand upon the fresh dressings at his throat, Shipmaster Devanti managed to speak clearly enough that all present could hear. ‘And once the tyranids enter a new system, no more astropathic signals come out.’

Thracian nodded his appreciation to the stubborn old serf. Once again, the man had defied his surgeons to attend this audience, donning a fresh dress

uniform with full rank insignia. Though his burns were healing slowly and without the full provision of a well-stocked apothecarion, the Chapter Master had no doubt that Devanti would be back in command of the *Heart* as soon as he could stand unaided. He would have to find another suitable command for Lieutenant– nay, *Shipmistress* Hannelore...

A moment of expectant hush filled the stateroom. Thracian realised that they were all looking at him.

With his hands resting on the table, he considered the accord that Baturbas had brought before them. The senator, far from showing any uncertainty or apprehension, merely sat and waited for the response, adjusting one of his wedding rings with those long, pale fingers of his.

‘Very well,’ Thracian said, at length. ‘The senate will continue to govern the people, and the people will continue to serve the Chapter.’

Senator Baturbas rose and, together with his two undernourished aides, bowed his bald head in gratitude. ‘The senate applauds you, my lord. I would also see the memory of Sotha and her people honoured, and the Scythes of the Emperor restored to their former greatness. May all of your recent shames be swiftly expunged by uncountable victories yet to come.’

*Shames.* The insult stung, but Thracian let it pass.

Instead, he opened a vox-link to the flagship’s bridge.

‘This is Master Thracian. Have word sent out to the rest of the fleet – we are returning to Sothara, and we will all go together. A new war is coming.’

When the rest of them had left his chambers, Thracian stood in quiet contemplation for a long while before Brother Hadrios came to him.

‘That went much as we anticipated, my lord,’ he said.

The Chapter Master’s eyes were closed, his breathing slow and precise in an attempt to calm his troubled spirit. ‘It did, but that did not make it any easier. I still do not even know who among my own warriors I can trust.’

‘The burden of that knowledge is yours to bear, though I shall help you in any way that I can.’

‘Can you tell me, then, if Thorcyra was aware of any of this?’

‘In truth, I do not know. Would it matter if he had been, now?’

‘I suppose not,’ Thracian sighed. ‘More may become apparent, once we reach the outer worlds.’

Hadrios looked over the scattered documents. ‘That it may, my lord.’

A pleasing thought crossed Thracian’s mind. He opened his eyes, but kept them narrow, savouring the idea. ‘The senator pledged the service of the refugees in restoring the greatness of the Chapter,’ he murmured. ‘I want to test his word on that.’

‘Of course, my lord. What would you have me do?’

‘Draft two thousand of them into active service, effective immediately. Bring their families too. We will armour ourselves with the innocent.’

Hadrios nodded. If the order gave him any pause, it did not show on his face.

‘It will be done,’ he replied, quickly and without emotion.

As he turned on his heel to leave, Thracian stopped him.

‘Brother. Wait. There is something else.’ Lowering his voice, he led Hadrios back towards the great viewports that looked out into the deep void beyond. Though he had not intended it, he realised that – for all their good intentions – they might appear to any unseen observer as little more than scheming conspirators. ‘You and I both know that the greatest threat to the Scythes of the Emperor comes not from the Kraken, but from within our own Chapter. Forewarned is forearmed, brother, and I would suggest that we do not make this knowledge available to any other until we can know who will prove true, and who will not.’

Hadrios nodded again. ‘That seems wise, under the circumstances. Equally, such revelations might also attract *new* enemies, within and without.’

‘Precisely. To that end, I am charging you with a very specific duty. I will name you as my lieutenant, and from here on you will answer only to me. I want you to remain vigilant. Hold up a light to the darkness that follows us and uncover the root of it, even if it stems all the way back to the halls of Mount Pharos itself.’

‘And what if this duty were to interfere with the greater goal – that of rebuilding the Chapter? We have suffered greatly. The disappearance of the gene-seed stock from the Giant’s Coffin has set back our efforts by months, if not years.’

Thracian took a deep breath. His mind was set.

‘You have my countenance, Brother Hadrios. Employ whatever means you deem necessary. None will oppose you, I will see to that. We will have

the truth, one way or another.’

Drawing up and casting his fist out in the Sothan reaper’s salute, Hadrios accepted his new appointment with an obvious, solemn pride.

‘Of course, my lord. After all, we have to be sure.’

HELOTH



Hive ship. Bio-wreckage. Ruined mother of monsters, and the twitching birth-sac of insidious, alien horror.

#70443 *Heloth* was all of these things, and more besides.

The stench of her burning choked the jungle – flakes of sticky ash drifted in a nauseating rain, settling amidst the mud and gore slicks of the area around the crash site. Slain out in the void, she had come tumbling like a clutch of falling stars to smite Miral Prime with her immense, smouldering bulk, spread now across an area the size of a small city. Little of the original landscape remained beneath her, and the fire was still spreading.

Even in death, it seemed that the hive ships of the tyranids might visit destruction upon their prey-worlds.

Thus had Veteran-Brother Menele's thoughts been darkened as Second Company pulled back to their Rhino transports. With the horrendous losses they had suffered, it had not been an orderly withdrawal so much as a rout, though his admittedly wounded pride in the Chapter would never allow him to admit it.

On the bouncing, shuddering floor of the Rhino's troop compartment, Captain Agaitas was dying. His armoured midriff had been torn open, the

blood loss catastrophic. Attended by the Apothecary, he writhed and groaned in agony, cursing the xenos and rolling his blinded eyes in a face raw with fresh burns.

‘They... have us...’ he gurgled. ‘The Coffin... will... fall...’

Menele looked to the Apothecary, who shook his head grimly. He was not a member of Agaitas’s command squad, and so Menele couldn’t recall his name. It hardly seemed to matter, now.

Brother Vasilis crouched against the far wall, clutching the ragged company standard tightly in his gauntlets. The fabric still steamed where it had been splattered with bio-acid from the attack that had killed Kostis and Gallagher, and Agaitas’s last command had been for Vasilis to raise it up again from the mud. ‘The noble horsemen of Sotha do not lie at the feet of abominations,’ the captain had said, right before one such abomination ended him. It was Menele who had ordered the retreat.

Like all of his company-brethren, he knew every stitch of the banner as though it were his own flesh: Conabos, the dark horse, rampant upon a chequered mosaic field and overlaid with the golden scythe of Second Company. None of them would see it lost to the tyranid onslaught, here on this unworthy and barbaric world. The Scythes of the Emperor had already lost too much.

The Rhino’s internal comm-link chimed. ‘*Two more large hostiles, coming around to outflank us from the south-east. Moving to evade.*’

Menele glanced back through the transport’s viewing aperture. Their driver was pushing the engine to its maximum load, the blazing trees and undergrowth rendered as a fiery blur surrounding the column as they sped from the crash site. Behind them, Third Squad’s Rhino was aflame, the hull’s gold and sable Chapter livery blistering away in the heat, and their driver was struggling to keep pace.

Further back still, the Scythes’ pursuer was gaining.

It towered over the jungle, its great forelimbs thundering through the burning trees with each heavy step, toppling and shattering their trunks in cascades of bright embers. The titanic beast let out a roar loud enough to rattle the troop compartment around Menele even over the shriek of the protesting engines, before spraying another wild flurry of bio-plasma bolts into the Rhino convoy.

Each impact was a burst of green-white fire that flashed like summer

lightning. Most tore harmlessly into the ground, showering scorched earth and sickly glowing fragments of wood, but he saw one strike another transport in the left frontal track housing. It was only a glancing hit, but something sheared off within the mechanism and sent the vehicle slewing madly to crash into a protruding spar of bio-debris from the fallen *Heloth*, some five metres thick. The Rhino's momentum lifted its rear end clear off the ground before hammering back down, the engine stalled out.

Menele cursed, and slammed the aperture slot closed before turning back to his brothers. 'That's Ninth Squad. They struck out hard.'

He looked down at Agaitas, whose delirious curses had given way to what looked like murmured prayers – his slack, bloody lips were moving, though barely any sound seemed to escape them.

Several of the battered warriors inside the Rhino regarded their captain with grim acceptance, the masks of their faceplates appearing almost morose in the compartment's dull light. But Menele knew that, as disheartening as it might be, no purpose of morale or honour was served in allowing Agaitas to linger on in this moribund state, and he could not stand by and watch it go on any longer.

He gripped the young Apothecary's shoulder pad, and spoke firmly. 'Give him peace.'

The Apothecary lifted his gaze from his patient – Throne, the lad could not have been more than a decade out of the Scout company, Menele realised. Were the survivors from Sotha spread so thinly that this was the best they could offer as replacement for Brother Musides? Nonetheless, the old veteran kept his thoughts to himself.

'Give him peace,' he repeated. 'Our mission to secure *Heloth* has failed, and our brother-captain has already paid the ultimate price. Take from him the Chapter's due, and be done with it.'

No one else spoke. The Rhino bucked and slewed, the track suspension squealing as they sped on.

The Apothecary nodded slowly. He reached for his pistol-like carnifex – Menele gritted his teeth at the bitter, bitter irony of the name – and placed it against Agaitas's temple with reverent care. When activated, the pneumatic mechanism would deliver a euthanizing metal bolt into the brainpan of the patient, ending their suffering in a painless instant. There was no Chaplain to administer last rites, nor indeed any words that would

make this grim duty any easier, nor soothe the passing of his noble battle-brother.

The captain held out a trembling hand towards Brother Vasilis and the company standard. His fingers grasped for what his sightless eyes could not find.

Then, with a loud *clack* that made Menele start in spite of himself, the carnifex did its work. Agaitas's hand fell to the floor, and he dropped limply into the crook of the Apothecary's waiting arm.

But the respectful silence that should have followed was cut all too short.

A monumental impact close by hurled Menele and two others across the compartment, and the Rhino's engine note rose sharply as the tracks whirled in the empty air. Menele slammed face-first into the bulkhead, feeling gravity shift around them as the transport rolled; then he was skidding back across the ceiling panels, with Agaitas's dead weight across his legs.

Someone's boltgun went off in the crush. The Apothecary's pristine breastplate exploded in a shower of red.

'Pile ou-' Menele began, just as the rear hatch of the Rhino burst inwards in a devastating flash of green fire.

Like Heloth, they too were burning now.

Consciousness returned to Menele slowly and fitfully. His limbs were heavy, but he felt armoured hands raising him up.

Three of them stumbled clear of the wreckage – three, from the seven that had boarded. Vasilis still bore the standard, walking the pole like an oversized crutch as he helped Menele back up the incline. Beyond them lay another Rhino – Third Squad's? – its rear section completely obliterated by a direct hit, and pieces of armoured bodies littered the smouldering earth all around. Bolter fire rang out in the middle-distance, and Menele caught sight of battle-weary survivors from Ninth and Sixth Squad falling back by sections from what remained of the tree line. Some bore power falces, the blades slick with tyranid blood where their field generators had failed under the sheer weight of the enemy's number.

And after them, between the blackened trees, came the xenos.

In the shadow of the bladed giants that were stalking the Scythes, lesser tyranid warrior-forms leapt and howled and hunted, with their

nightmarish, multifarious forms silhouetted against the flames. Another deafening roar from the nearest bio-Titan shook the burning jungle, only this time much closer and answered by hooting calls from the beast's approaching kin.

*How could there be so many? The hive ship was dead...*

His system already pushed to the limit by supra-hormones and combat stimms from his battleplate, Menele forced himself to stand unaided, and took stock of the situation.

Then he drew his chainsword, and opened a tactical vox-channel.

'Brothers, to me. We will stand as one.'

Affirmatives echoed back to him, all sense of squad-level command long abandoned – Menele counted fewer than thirty ident returns on his visor display. Brother Vasilis stood at his back, firm and resolute, planting the standard and letting the banner unfurl in the fiery breeze.

'Here they come,' the warrior muttered, drawing his own blade with his free hand.

The tyranids surged forwards, catching the slowest of the retreating Space Marines even as the rest formed up in an improvised defensive cordon. Menele snarled, and made a series of swiping gestures with his chainsword.

'Regroup! Two romphaean lines... Fire at will!'

The first xenos fell to the thunder of mass-reactive fire, their sinewy bodies tumbling into the ashen mud. Severed limbs and ropes of bright ichor flew through the air.

But still they came.

Striding forwards, Menele loosed carefully aimed shots from his bolt pistol, dropping three gaunt beasts before they could close with the first defensive line. 'Hold rank!' he bellowed, stooping to retrieve a fallen falx and tossing it over to one of his unarmed battle-brothers. 'Prepare to engage!'

With bolt shells whipping over their heads, the Scythes' first line readied themselves. Menele took his place in the line too, staring hard in hatred at their xenos attackers as they closed the gap between them.

The tyranids swept over them like a living, bladed tide. Swinging axe, chainsword and falx alike with deadly, practised skill, nonetheless the warriors of Second Company might as well have been trying to reap the

great oceans of Sotha with their blades. Menele hacked again and again, but felt the battle-brother to his right fall beneath the xenos assault – then the warrior to his left. Menele spun and fired point-blank into the gaping, fanged maw of a tyranid beast, then came about to snatch a glance back to the second defensive line.

The moment of inattention almost cost him his head. Literally.

A barbed claw came down over his shoulder and struck into his plastron. He twisted with the blow, driving his chainsword hard into the braying tyranid warrior's upper shoulder, but the strength of the thing's attack sprawled him from his feet and sent the embedded forelimb raking up his visor. Ceramite and plasteel tore with the sheer brute force of it, and Menele's helmet twisted painfully about his face as it was wrenched half-free of the armour's neck seal.

He crashed down with the wounded beast on top of him, his vision crazed by the sudden loss of half his faceplate. He blinked hard with his exposed right eye, trying to shake away the disorienting overlay of his damaged auto-senses.

And he realised that he was gazing directly into the cold, predatory eyes of his foe.

Without thinking, he rammed the chainsword into its abdomen and gunned the motors, carving through chitinous exoskeleton and softer tissues with equal ease. The beast convulsed with the blade's action, gore spraying Menele's armour and staining the mud beneath them both, and it swatted at him with jerking, palsied limbs. Finally, he snatched up his pistol and blew out the top of the tyranid's crested skull.

The first line had dissolved into half a dozen smaller melees, but the second held true. His brothers fired indiscriminately into the alien throng, or fought them blade-to-claw in the early dawn light. He dragged himself to his feet and hacked down some foul winged creature as it swooped for him, and for just one moment he dared to believe that the remnants of Second Company might hold out until Chapter Master Thorcyra could send—

A shadow fell over them all. The shadow of the bio-Titan. Its roar almost knocked Menele from his feet.

It opened fire into the Scythes' position with its great, fleshy weapon analogues. Bio-plasma burned through armoured Space Marines and

tyranid warrior-forms alike, hurling them aside like so many insects. Menele saw Brother Vasilis obliterated where he stood – one second he was there and the next he was gone, and the tattered, scorched company standard was hurled down once more.

Dazed and exhausted, Menele staggered through the carnage towards it. The horsemen of Sotha would never fall. Second Company would never fall.

Still trading fire and fury with the xenos, the other survivors moved to cover him. Another bio-Titan crested the trees behind them, bellowing at the first as though they might be two bull phantines vying for territory out on the plains.

Menele sank to his knees in the filth, grasping the banner pole and hefting it upright again. Another warrior, his armour scorched by plasma fire, came to aid him.

Then, the wider vox-link crackled. ‘...report... status... *Second Company...*’

Confused, Menele looked beyond the battle to the rising Miral sun. They had not received communications from the Giant’s Coffin bastion since the first attack at *Heloth*. Even so, the voice came through again, more clearly this time.

*‘Approaching Chapter forces, report now. Tell us how to help you.’*

He turned to his battle-brothers. ‘It’s the Coffin – they must have visual on us!’ He pressed a finger to the link in the side of his ruined helm and spoke as clearly as he could. ‘Coffin, we’re surrounded. The Titans took out our air support, and chewed through the column in less than an hour. The jungle is already swarming with tyranid hatchlings from the *Heloth* wreck.’

*‘How many of you remain? Can you make it to the outer walls?’*

Menele scanned the encroaching horde, and the faces of his brethren as they fought against it.

They were exhausted. Spent.

‘Unlikely. We’re down to—’

Above them, the two bio-Titans lunged at one another, snapping with teeth as long as sword blades, their tread shaking the ground. Menele cried out to those stragglers still engaging the smaller tyranids on the muddy slopes, who might yet be crushed by these great monsters that appeared to

have forgotten the original battle entirely.

‘Pull back! Pull back, brothers!’ He resumed his report as quickly as he could. ‘We’re down to less than two squads. They hit us hard. The captain is gone, although we’re rallied to the company standard. I don’t think we’re going anywhere, Coffin.’

They all knew it – they had nothing left. Nothing that could wound a bio-Titan at close range. Not a single Devastator, nor heavy support vehicle.

But the bastion at the Giant’s Coffin had such weapons in abundance, and now they were within visual range. Menele hoped that he would not have to spell it out for whoever was on the other end of the vox-link.

There was a long pause. ‘*Second Company. Hold position.*’

‘Understood. For Sotha, brother.’

‘*Aye. For Sotha.*’

Menele cut the link, and raised his chainsword high. ‘Second Company, stand fast! Let the xenos horrors come and bask in the glory of our noble standard!’

The Scythes of the Emperor knew what such an order meant. In short order they pulled back, spending the last of their ammunition as best they could. They raised their voices together in the old Sothan battle hymns, and in laments for their lost brethren. Many gauntleted hands gripped the haft of the banner pole, and as one they held it aloft even as the tyranids tore into them.

The shrieking thunder of incoming artillery strikes drowned out their songs, and their death-screams. The standard of Second Company fluttered, ragged, in the backwash of each colossal detonation. Menele and his battle-brothers were united until the end in their defiance of the xenos, with what remained of their lives measured not even in seconds, but in fractured, half-glimpsed instants of indiscriminate annihilation.

And the dark horse Conabos stood, proud as ever, upon the banner’s chequered field.

# RECLAMATION



The crates were old, heavy-duty ammunition cases, their edges worn and battered by months of indelicate handling by cargo servitors, their security tabs drilled through. They both bore serial numbers and the forge worlds of origin for their original shipments, though the stencilled, yellow letters were now almost completely illegible. Like almost everything on board the *Heart of Cronus*, the cases had been salvaged. Repurposed.

Fresh from the decontamination vestibules, Bokari led three of his neophyte brethren through the hatchway and into the sweltering forge. The young Space Marines carried their burden with a weary reverence – like pilgrims who had grown too used to the same, oft-trodden path.

Sebastion turned from the vibro-lathe, allowing his serf menials to continue in their work, the air ringing with the sounds of hammering and heavy machinery. He swallowed hard, and cleared his throat a few times before speaking. He was still unused to conversing verbally in his daily duties.

‘Novice Bokari. What have you brought me?’

Bokari grunted as he and Medon set their crate upon the deck, and then rubbed his sore palms together. ‘Such spoils, forge master!’ he exclaimed wryly, pulling back the lid with a flourish. ‘Have you ever seen treasures

like these?’

Without humour, Sebastion peered down into the crate. His bulky ocular array clicked and refocused.

‘Actually, there was precious little worth saving,’ Bokari muttered, ‘and certainly nothing from your list.’ He knelt, sifting through the contents and holding out a few items for closer inspection. ‘Some choice pieces, though. At least one complete Corvus helm, by my reckoning – although you might need to machine out the... uhh...’

The forge master took the pitted dome of the helmet from him, pairing it with an appropriate faceplate. ‘The *crest sensor ridge*, Novice Bokari. Unique in the Imperial Mark VI power armour variant, in that it is off-centre towards the shield arm.’ He ran a finger down the length of the crest. ‘Do you know why that is?’

Bokari hung his head. ‘I do not, my lord.’

Sebastion tossed the two unattached pieces back into the crate and retrieved an equally battered vambrace- and-cannon assembly. ‘Then there is still much for you to learn. Our honoured battleplate is a wonder of Martian ingenuity. The component parts can be combined in virtually any battlefield configuration, regardless of variant design or origin, and with a few minor adjustments it can be made to run as efficiently as a suit fresh from the forges.’

He held the vambrace up to the light. It had once been painted a dull green, though the ceramite outer layer had been so extensively burned away – at the cuff, almost down to the structural shell beneath – that it had a mottled, vaguely organic appearance.

‘This, however, is useless to me.’

Sebastion squeezed the plates, and the corroded metal buckled and fractured in his grip like nothing more than flawed husk-iron. Bokari watched the fragments tumble to the floor.

‘But what about the rest, my lord?’ he asked. ‘Some of this looks like fine salvage. Fit for spares, at least?’

Flexing his shoulders, Sebastion brought the two uppermost limbs of his servo-harness forwards to pick through the rest of the crate. ‘This is tyranid reclamation pool detritus, is it not?’

Bokari looked to Medon, who nodded. ‘Aye, forge master. The Forty-Ninth Salvation Team just returned from an insertion into hive ship

#78114 *Rocola*. They have the full salvage documents from the quarantine officials, though – it's all been cleared.'

Sebastion drew a survey module from his belt, pressing it against the surface of a high-rimmed pauldron. The shoulder pad was a grubby red, its surface scored by xenos bio-acid, and bore the symbol of a lion rampant. The forge master regarded it with a craftsman's eye.

'I don't have time for restoration projects, novice. We are at war. The environmental seals on all of these plates are gone, and I doubt that the remaining fibre-bundles will carry a charge. All of the servos will need replacing, too, and we're not going to pull spares from the reserve stores.' He handed the pauldron to Bokari. 'Melt down the plates that are at less than fifty per cent frame-integrity, and take the rest to your workstation. If you can put together a suit worthy of blessing, then I'll gladly recommend you for apprenticeship to the forge.'

Bokari smiled broadly and bowed. 'Thank you, forge master.'

Sebastion made to return to his work, but Bokari pointed to the second crate.

'Forgive me, my lord, but I have brought you something else. Something you will definitely want to see.'

The other two neophytes drew back the lid and the forge master's eye widened.

Bulky and supine, the upper torso and right arm of a suit of heavy Indomitus-pattern Terminator armour lay in the crate, as though it might be a burial casket for some martyred hero. Though the metal was stripped almost bare, it had clearly once borne a dark blue Chapter livery.

At the sight, the nearest serf menials halted in their tasks and made the sign of the aquila over their hearts, awe written openly upon their faces.

Sebastion could hardly speak. 'Where... Where did you find this?'

Medon stepped forwards. 'In an outer blister, my lord. There was no gravity – no blood, either. He was just sort of *drifting* there.'

'He?'

'The former occupant. He'd been dead a long time, I think, but we took what was left of him to the Apothecaries. With dignity, my lord. They'll see to him properly.'

The forge master raised up the incomplete arm of the suit, noting every mark and blemish upon its surface, and measuring the strained interface

spacings with a pair of callipers. A single tear ran down his cheek.

Bokari placed a hand upon the tarnished eagle across the breastplate.

‘It’s not perfect, I know – the gauntlet has no fingers, but the weapon mounts are intact. I thought it would certainly be worthy of restoration, until we can find more. A fourth suit of Terminator armour still wouldn’t be enough to assemble a full Codex squad formation, but I imagine it’d go a long way to restoring some morale in the fleet.’

Sebastion did not look up. ‘Aye. To the Scythes of the Emperor, this is a treasure indeed, Bokari. Worth more than all the rest put together, and more than the life of any single Space Marine. The Forty-Ninth team should be commended and honoured for this.’

The forge master issued a signal-command to a loading servitor to bear the suit away to his workshop sanctum. Activity in the forge resumed, but Sebastion looked pensive.

‘Do you know what some of our battle-brothers say, Novice Bokari? They say that we dishonour the memory of these fallen warriors and their Chapters by cannibalising the remains of their wargear for our own needs.’

Bokari frowned. ‘These fallen warriors have no need of it anymore. If I were to fall in battle, I would want everything I owned to be gathered up and thrown back at the bastard xenos.’

Sebastion’s ocular array whirred as he looked the neophyte in the eye. His machine-gaze was suitably cold and detached, but tinged with a hint of regret.

‘One way or another, Bokari, it will be.’

DAEDALUS



The thing that swam in the void before them was an abomination, in the truest sense of the word. It hung suspended against the emptiness above the hololith projection table, surrounded by tiny, flickering motes of light that represented only the largest of its brood-swarm vessels. At such magnification, even they were rendered indistinct next to the hive ship itself.

Brother Esau felt cold revulsion in his gut at the sight of it.

‘Throne,’ he murmured, blink-clicking the subtle augmetic that replaced his right eye. ‘What a monster.’

A vicious looking brute, it had not the trailing tendrils nor spiny, armoured growths borne by so many of its kin in Hive Fleet Kraken. Rather, its fleshy bulk was blunted at the fore into a kind of snout, complete with a pair of what might have been mandibles sporting an array of ill-fitting teeth, each many dozens of metres in length. All along its belly and back were yawning birthing orifices crusted with xenos filth, while its hindmost quarters were splayed like stubby, amputated limbs that kicked languidly at the vacuum.

All eyes in the strategium were upon this half-evolved horror in the tactical display, but those eyes were noticeably few. The strike cruiser

*Atreides* had been built to carry an entire company of Space Marines to war, along with their weaponry, transports and attendant serfs and bondsmen.

And yet, since the recent tragedies that had cleaved through their ranks, she was currently home to only fifteen battle-brothers of the Scythes of the Emperor.

That accounted for more than a tenth of the Chapter's total strength.

Shipmistress Hannelore leaned wearily over the table, her hands gripping its worn and battered edge. 'This is what we face, my lords,' she said, nodding to the gargantuan xenos beast. 'The hive ship and its brood-swarm entered the Brakur System approximately eight days ago, local capital standard. It's almost as if the Kraken knew we were coming.'

Sergeant Cassander, leader of Esau's depleted Assault squad, glanced up from the hololith. 'Can we expect any further contacts? Is this merely the vanguard of a larger splinter fleet entering the sector?'

Hannelore looked at him, sagging a little more. 'No, brother-sergeant, but that is hardly the point. We can't hope to stand against even this single swarm, alone. The *Atreides* isn't prepared for that level of engagement. This was supposed to be a multiple-objective expedition to an uncontested system, but we've arrived to find the enemy already attacking Brakur Four, and less than a day away from reaching Brakur Dominus as well. Communications have been severely disrupted.'

'Shipmistress, I hope you are not suggesting that we abandon our mission...'

She drew herself up, her jaw squared. 'I suggest nothing of the kind, my lord. I am simply informing you that direct combat with the tyranid fleet is not an option, at this time.'

Tapping at the hololith controls, Cassander called up the tactical data screed once more. 'I still see only one hive ship, and a swarm spread thin across two simultaneous invasion efforts. What do we know about this ambitious beast, then? Give me something to work with.'

'The hive ship's designation is #37067 *Daedalus*,' Hannelore replied. 'Though its void-warfare capabilities are to be considered average for a tyranid vessel of its size and displacement, its true strength lies in its swarm vessels, which are numerous and heavily weaponised. *Daedalus* is known to favour winged bio-forms in a planetary assault, and...'

Esau noted the shipmistress' pause. So too did several of his brethren. She steeled her nerve.

'...and we have confirmed that it was present at the fall of Sotha, my lords.'

Angry murmurs passed between the warriors gathered around the table. The home world of the Scythes of the Emperor, a shining beacon of Imperial glory on the fringes of Ultima Segmentum for countless millennia, had fallen to the implacable advance of Hive Fleet Kraken several years ago. The loss of hundreds of brother Scythes defending the fortress-monastery at Mount Pharos had wounded the Chapter deeply, but it was the shame of their forced retreat that still rankled with so many of the survivors.

That this monster had been part of the invading xenos forces should not have made a difference and yet, of course, it did.

Cassander cast about the group, irritation twisting his features. 'Be still, brothers! Do not let your desire for vengeance distract you from our objectives, here and now – that was the lesson we learned after the slaughter at Giant's Coffin. We fight a different kind of war, now. A war for survival.'

He gestured to Esau.

'This young warrior is of the last generation to ascend from the neophytes of noble Sotha, and so too is the honourable Sergeant Quintos. If any of us should feel such righteous fury then it should be them, and yet they stand with us, dedicated in body and soul to the vision of Master Thracian for the future of our Chapter.'

Esau felt the gaze of his brothers upon him, and straightened. He did not let any admission of the unreserved hatred he felt in his hearts towards the xenos burn a hole in Cassander's fine speech. 'For the future!' he repeated, with every ounce of conviction he could muster. 'For Sotha!'

The sergeant nodded. 'Aye, for Sotha. Now – our original objectives remain. What is the optimal course of action, given these new terms of engagement and the presence of pre-deployed enemy forces in-system?'

It was the veteran Galerius who answered, almost without hesitation.

'Twin flights, brother-sergeant. We mirror the tactics of the xenos in striking for both worlds simultaneously, but use our superior speed and tactical advantage to achieve our objectives and withdraw again before the

swarm can bring its full might to bear. As it is written, we must be the reaper's blade, as well as the hand that wields it.'

'Division of assets required?' Shipmistress Hannelore queried, gruffly, while rubbing at her forehead. 'We certainly cannot shield *two* dropship flights, so one of the missions will be running without orbital support.'

Esau stepped forwards. 'Respectfully, honoured servant, the mission to Brakur Dominus does not require support from the strike cruiser. The tyranids have not yet reached the planet. We send the two gunships with the largest hold capacity to assist in the civilian evacuation effort – they can easily outrun the xenos at full burn, in the void.' He pointed to the hololith, and the flashing golden scythe icon in the shadow of the hive ship. 'On the fourth world, we have the Apothecary's locator signal already locked in, regardless of any communications disruption. We can mount a rapid, precise aerial insertion to retrieve him from the surface, with covering fire from your esteemed gunners on the *Atreides*.'

Sergeant Cassander, evidently impressed, rapped the knuckles of his gauntlet on the table's edge. 'Young Esau has it, brothers. Squad Quintos, you will undertake Reaper operations on Brakur Dominus. Squad Cassander, to the armourium – prepare for deep strike combat drop. We'll be up against whatever horrors this *Daedalus* wants to throw our way.'

The strike cruiser's primary hangar rang with the din of hurried assembly.

Loading servitors racked anti-air missiles into the waiting pods of the great Thunderhawks, the austere *Chrepan Steed* and battle-scarred *Harpagus*, along with weighty battlecannon shells for the main guns. The servitors' Techmarine overseers checked and re-checked the belted ammunition feeds of the auxiliary weapons, knowing full well that they themselves would soon be piloting the gunships, and directing the efforts of the drafted human gunners if the xenos managed to catch up with them. Tech-adepts fired the engines, cycling up through the pre-combat flight routines.

Across the wide hangar apron, on launch rails intended for much larger craft, were the three elements of the *Atreides*' only remaining assault wing – two 'Talons and a single workhorse Storm Eagle gunship. As Esau and his brethren were towed up towards it on a repurposed cargo flatbed, he saw the two members of Squad Quintos take the knee before their

sergeant. They hurriedly swore the oaths scribbled on parchment now being pressed onto their battleplate by liveried retainers.

As they rose, they raised their voices to join the battle hymns that echoed across the strike cruiser's many decks. Serf and Space Marine alike, man and woman, young and old, all joined in the ancient rite, singing in glory of the Adeptus Astartes and to the destruction of their foes. These words were as old as Sotha itself, dating back even to pre-colonial times, and every servant of the Chapter knew them as their birthright.

Simply because Sotha was no more did not mean that the old ways would change.

Sergeant Cassander stepped from the flatbed as it came to a halt beneath the Storm Eagle's open troop compartment, gathering his armour's umbilical in both hands. 'Brothers, take your marks for embarkation.'

They did as ordered, attended by mortal armourers every step of the way. A young man was directing an even younger man as he machined Esau's pauldron into place. 'No, loosen the bolts – you've caught the fibre loom behind the plate. This mighty warrior won't be able to raise his arm beyond shoulder-height, if you send him to war like that.'

Esau slowed to allow the novice to make the adjustment. He saw the youth's hands trembling.

'Take your time,' he reassured him with a smile that softened the harsh scar around his eye, and the cold blue of the augmented lens itself. 'You'll remember this, now, and you'll never make that same mistake again.'

The novice nodded his thanks as he fixed the pad back into place, and Esau leaned towards him in mock conspiracy.

'It's the same for us all. This is my first deep strike drop, outside of simulation,' he whispered.

Keeping his trailing umbilical clear of the deck, he looked down to see where a large white circle had been painted on the scuffed metal. His name was written in chalk next to it, where the name of a previous battle-brother had been hastily scratched away.

So was each member of Squad Cassander assigned a place beneath one of the rails above their heads, with seven jump packs hanging ready in the cradles, facing each other in pairs. Esau glanced at the three empty spaces, and the disconnected fuel lines that dangled limply over them.

Their names had been obliterated, too.

Behind the Storm Eagle, klaxons signalled the readiness of the two Thunderhawks to depart, the whine of their engines growing louder as they traversed the launch rails. Cassander opened a vox-channel to Quintos and his warriors. ‘Emperor speed you, brothers. Do not look back.’

Brother Galerius narrowed his eyes. ‘Theirs is the easier task, but ours is the more noble...’

Other members of the Assault squad murmured their agreement – Tolliver and Xristos, both Sothan-born, and Kenai from distant Beremin. As ever, the dour-faced veteran Sorgn said nothing, staring absently into the empty pack cradle opposite him, lost in his own thoughts.

Status lights flashed green and the drop-rails descended, the packs guided down over the squad’s shoulders by the armoury serfs. Something was out of place, and the lights turned red as the rails withdrew again. Esau shifted from foot to foot, anxious to be underway. He could see his sword and helm ready on the arming frame before them.

Cassander called out over the roar of the Thunderhawks’ engines as they powered out through the atmospheric field. ‘Haste, honoured servants! The world below us will be long devoured by the Kraken, ere we launch!’

Two serfs scrambled up to the hanging rails, and heaved Sorgn’s pack back and forth in its cradle until some unseen connection was made true and the lights switched back to green. The warrior didn’t seem to notice, not even reacting until it was lowered onto his waiting back.

Each of them attended by two serfs in a rehearsed series of arming checks, the jump packs interfaced with Squad Cassander’s battleplate, and their umbilicals were disconnected as suit power switched to the turbofanned micro-reactors. Esau felt a tremor in his armour’s servos, and then the weight of his heavy limbs dropped away to almost nothing. He looked up to see Tolliver’s helmet being fastened into place, the mismatched eye lenses flickering to life as the inbuilt auto-senses took over.

Then he caught Galerius’ gaze, and they shared a nod of respect as their armourers stepped up. The older warrior’s helm was a Mark IV, crowned with the laurels of a Sotharan champion – far more impressive than Esau’s own reclaimed cast-off that was pulled over his brow with a snap-hiss of pressurisation.

His chainsword was thrust into the sheath-clasp at his hip, though he

could not see by whom. With his head locked forwards in the jump pack harness, he felt his greaves being mag-locked into the cradle runner as the drop safeties were engaged.

The sergeant's ident-rune flickered onto the squad display inside Esau's visor. 'Squad Cassander, all readouts confirmed for rail loading,' he announced over the vox. 'Be the blade, brothers! Pilot, we are ready.'

*'Cassander, confirmed. Initiating loading sequence.'*

The deck seemed to fall away from their boots as the rails were hoisted back into place, and then tilted madly as each cradle rotated ninety degrees up and around, dragging the Space Marines into a facedown dangle from their pack harnesses. It felt undignified, but it was the quickest and most efficient way to deploy a full Assault squad from the air.

Even so, Esau felt like a bolt-round about to be chambered.

The drop-rails slid inside the gunship hold with a squeal of gears. The sounds of the hangar receded as the hydraulic ramp closed behind them, the Storm Eagle's engines cycling up. A single amber beacon lamp whirled in the cramped space.

The pilot's voice came again. 'Atreides-actual, assault wing ready. Escort flights Talon One, Talon Two, trap for launch. Mark. Clear. Switching to manoeuvring thrusters.'

Esau took a steadying breath as the gunship lifted off. All he could see was the floor of the hold close beneath him, and the soles of Xristos' mag-locked boots in the next cradle along.

The engine note rose sharply, inertia tugging at their harnesses.

*'Accelerating to combat speed. Escort flight inbound.'*

Then they breached the atmospheric field and raced into the void beyond.

The orbital approach to Brakur IV was mired by the brood-swarm of *Daedalus*. The largest vessel-organisms were bladed devourers the size of an Imperial cruiser – whether these were immature siblings of the great hive ship or lesser craft in their own right was impossible to say.

The assault wing flew in tight formation, the pilots attempting to skirt the edge of the swarm on their way in. The void was lit by strobing flashes from the mighty gun batteries of the *Atreides*, though even direct hits on the xenos were eerily quiet in the upper reaches of the planet's exosphere, lending the engagement a strange feeling of disconnection.

That changed soon enough. The bio-cruisers were far from being the only threat to the Scythes gunships.

In the spaces between them, many thousands of kilometres wide, there swooped drone ships and other sundry bio-forms too numerous to catalogue. They reacted like a swarm of angry insects, perceiving the threat to their parent vessels from these strange newcomers, with their cold metal skin and fiery trails. There was no sign of any remaining resistance from the original human defenders of Brakur; no frigates driving at the tyranids for one last, glorious attempt at martyrdom, no isolated satellite guns determined to keep firing until their magazines ran dry. The invaders had evidently rolled over them and already begun their conquest of the planet below.

The Stormtalon escorts opened up on the stalker drones. They shredded chitinous armour with their blazing assault cannons, tearing xenos craft asunder and scattering their remains to the clutches of the fourth world's gravity well. The drones were fast, and they were agile, but they could not stand long before the sheer weight of firepower levelled against them.

*'Assault wing, surgical strike on grid one-one-nine,'* came the pilot's voice over the comm. *'Rockets free, rockets free!'*

The larger Storm Eagle joined the attack, loosing a flurry of Vengeance missiles that filled the emptiness before them with detonations and whirling shrapnel. Though such a barrage could never hope to do significant damage to anything bigger than light voidcraft, one of the tyranid cruisers at their starboard wing juddered and convulsed in response, slowly rolling its exposed flank away from the unexpected irritation.

And with that, the assault wing had a clear corridor through the periphery of the swarm. *Daedalus* still loomed above them, blotting out the light of the stars beyond, but the Techmarine pilots saw their chance and lit their engines for the surface. The *Atreides*, having remained comfortably out of bio-weapons range, powered up and away from the orbit of Brakur IV, striking out for the cover of the system's binary suns.

In their haste, the assault wing pilots did not see the vast hive ship beginning a glacial turn after them. Its brood had been stung, when all resistance should have already been extinguished. In the void over this first delectable prey-world, they howled their petulant frustration in the

silent gestalt of the hive mind's alien consciousness.

*Daedalus* was compelled to answer that cry.

Heaving the cavernous birthing chambers deep within its foul interior, the hive ship clenched in a manner that nothing of such immense size had any right to do – not in any universe where goodness and wholesome things still endured. Its toothy mandibles spread in a silent scream. Its great spine arched.

With a final spasm, *Daedalus* spawned a new horror. Then another.

The twin hulks, formless and yet vaguely ovoid, tumbled into the vacuum in clouds of icy amniotic matter and slick with unspeakable residues. They trailed long, spined tails behind them, scattering the lesser bio-ships as they went, propelled by the force of their birth down towards the prey-world below.

Streaking contrails from a dozen other bio-ship landers scored the heavens around them. They were not the only xenos objects making planetfall, but they were to be among the most disastrous for the Scythes of the Emperor and their mission to the surface. As they plunged through the atmospheric boundary, the heat of re-entry warmed their void-chilled hearts. Ablative flesh and horned shell scorched, and cracked, and finally split apart.

Hatched on the wing, the two fledgling beasts drew their first fiery breaths, and roared at the almost unbearable agony of their new existence.

Brother Esau's world was reduced to the square metre of hold decking in front of his eyes, and the vox-chatter inside his helm. Though they had broken away from contact with the strike cruiser, the Storm Eagle was beginning to pick up signals from the embattled defenders of Brakur IV, and they did not paint a promising picture of the mission ahead. The locals were throwing everything they had against the tyranids and, by all accounts, Squad Cassander was about to drop right into the heart of the invasion.

They streaked now across the open skies over the ocean, banking between poisoned clouds towards the continental city of Tamuero. Far from the planetary capital in the northern hemisphere, the Scythes were nonetheless headed straight for their intended target.

From somewhere up ahead in the gunship's troop compartment, Sergeant

Cassander reviewed the mission parameters. ‘Brother-Apothecary Aratus’ locator signal is strong,’ he said, ‘even though we have not been able to raise him on the secure Chapter frequencies. He was in Tamuero’s inner ward districts to screen potential recruits, along with a handful of medicae staff from the *Heart of Cronus*. In an ideal scenario, we would evacuate all of them, as well as the gene-seed stocks...’

The sergeant paused. His implication was clear, but it was as well to spell it out.

‘The primary objective is the retrieval of the gene-seed. Aratus himself is secondary.’

Esau spoke up. ‘And the medicae adepts? The recruits?’

‘Negative. We couldn’t fit them in here, anyway, even if we wanted to. I am authorising the immediate use of lethal force, if a confrontation occurs – we cannot waste time arguing with our human servants about who is supposed to be ensuring the survival of whom.’

That left a bitter taste. A moment of silence passed between them all, broken only by the rapid crack of the Storm Eagle’s lascannons engaging another airborne target outside. Then Cassander went on.

‘Brother Galerius, you have fought alongside Aratus before. What can we expect from him, under these circumstances? Is he the “pragmatic” sort?’

Galerius thought for a moment. ‘Hmm. I’d say, under these *specific* circumstances, that you’ll have no objections from him. He will be protecting the gene-seed first and foremost. He’ll understand the need for urgency in our extraction.’

‘Excellent,’ the sergeant replied. Then he changed the subject entirely. ‘Now, I want to see a tight deployment again this time. We’ll be dropping directly into the Second Ward. Kenai, if we cannot find a clear patch then you must burn us one out with the flamer. Frag storm, anything. We must not become separated, or the xenos horde will swallow us up one at a time. Once we secure the landing site, we—’

Alarm sirens howled in the enclosed space. Esau tried to look towards the front of the hold, to gain any idea of what was happening, but once again he couldn’t see past Xristos’ suspended boots.

The pilot’s voice crackled over the vox-link. ‘*We’re being shadowed – xenos contact, right on our tail, three hundred metres. Deploying countermeasure chaff. I’ll try to blind it.*’

The gunship banked sharply, throwing the Assault squad from side to side in their cradle mounts along the drop-rail. Esau reflexively gripped the straps of his jump pack harness with both hands to steady himself.

‘Pilot,’ Cassander called out, ‘do you have visual on our pursuers?’

*‘I can’t see, it’s too... Throne! Escort flights, break, break, break! Move to engage!’*

There was a hard impact against the hull, one that sent the Storm Eagle slewing through the air, its engines shrieking in protest. One of the ‘Talons shot past them on the port side, opening fire with its assault cannons.

They started to climb hard, only for another colossal impact to shake the fuselage.

Galerius cursed with the force of it. ‘Holy Terra, that wasn’t a bio-weapon attack – something struck us!’

Esau opened his mouth to reply, but an almighty crashing blow knocked the gunship from the opposite side and stole the breath from his lungs. His legs came loose from the mag-lock runner, swinging wide and striking the wall as the Storm Eagle rolled drunkenly to starboard, and he felt something give in the cradle above him.

The left rail mechanism broke free of the ceiling in a shower of sparks, dropping Sergeant Cassander, Sorgn, Xristos and Esau to the deck. The gunship continued to roll, tangling them as the metal twisted under the combined weight of four Space Marines and their jump packs.

That was enough. Esau’s cradle links snapped free, taking the safety locks with them. He sprawled across the tilted wall of the hold, the Storm Eagle struggling to right itself. Sorgn at least had the presence of mind to release his own cradle manually – he pushed himself to his feet as smoothly as he could, moving up to free Brother Xristos next.

Sergeant Cassander was still pinned under the drop-rail. ‘Pilot! What in the name of–’

The gunship lurched maddeningly, the forward-starboard bulkhead caving inwards with a shriek of agonised steel. Air roared out through the rift in the fuselage even as a claw the length of a Rhino transport cleaved through and into the troop compartment.

Beyond, in the dazzlingly bright whirl of daylight and clouds, Esau saw a fanged maw that could have swallowed a man whole without even touching the sides.

They were in a flat spin now, falling from the sky in the embrace of this new terror. It bellowed, wrenching the hole wider and snapping at the front of the stricken aircraft.

There were others, too – smaller things, the diminutive winged gargoyles that Esau had seen in battle so many times before. They dived and clambered over the hull, or swooped around the unfolding struggle like carrion birds. The pilot's agonised cries over the vox were punctuated by wild bolt pistol shots from the cockpit.

Sergeant Cassander drew his own pistol and tried to fire blindly at their attackers. 'Esau! Sorgn!' he called out over the deafening rush of the wind. 'Get the others first! Get them down!'

Esau managed to stand, but the ungainly weight of his jump pack pulled him over to one side as they rolled. The gunship lurched again as the gigantic creature tried to claw its way in, tearing at the ragged hole with its teeth and nosing its armoured snout through the breach. The young Space Marine looked up to see Galerius, Kenai and Tolliver being rocked violently from side to side in their cradles, completely unable to release or defend themselves.

But before he could even think to do anything more, the hydraulics of the main assault ramp gave out, tearing the whole assembly from the front of the craft. In a single, dizzying instant, Sorgn was gone, knocked out through the opening in the tangle of twisted metal, and into the empty sky beyond.

The Storm Eagle was trailing black smoke as it fell, its engines stalling, locked in the clawed embrace of the creature that held them. The deck tilted further and further as they plunged through the air together, the pilot now either dead or having lost control completely – Esau couldn't tell. The fallen rail began to slide, dragging Cassander and Xristos with it. They kicked and struggled, trying to gain any purchase on the metal floor, but to no avail. The sergeant managed to half-turn beneath the weight of the rail, just as he slid into the great, snapping jaws of the xenos beast.

He screamed in agony, his pistol and blade forgotten. His armour gave way beneath the titanic bite pressure. Blood scattered in the rushing air.

Then the tyrannid's fangs pierced the fusion cells of his jump pack.

The blast threw the creature's head back, obliterating Sergeant Cassander's body to the roar of the wind outside. Xristos was blown clean

out of his jump pack's harness, the dead weight of his armoured form skidding away across the angled deck, while Esau was hurled to the rear of the compartment. He narrowly avoided the sharp end of the broken jump rail only to slam hard into the sealed bulkhead, falling back down in a daze.

The gigantic creature, mewling and howling in pain as it spat broken teeth, released the Storm Eagle and soared away. It was evidently content to let gravity finish what it had started.

Galerius, still trapped on the second rail, called out to Esau over the vox. 'They're getting in, brother! Purge them! Purge them with fire!'

Shaking his helm to clear his senses, Esau looked ahead to the roaring breach. Even as the world outside rolled over and over in that disorienting view, he saw a handful of the most tenacious gargoyle beasts dragging themselves inside on their taloned wings.

On the deck beneath the second rail was Kenai's flamer, dropped during the blast.

Esau scrambled forwards as best he could. Xristos' limp form slid past him, bumping off the debris and out through the wide gap in the hull.

'Move quickly, brother!' Galerius urged him. 'Use your mag-locks!'

Cursing himself for a fool, Esau magnetised his boots to the deck and lunged for the flamer. The tyranids hissed and growled as they scuttled towards him with murder in their eyes.

He snatched up the weapon, thumbed the safety off and squeezed the trigger.

Fire roared in the enclosed space, fanned by the raging winds. It set the xenos ablaze, their screeching howls almost deafening against the white noise of the gunship's descent. They thrashed and flapped, their membranous wings too ruined to lift them away from the kiss of the flames. Esau swept the blazing stream back and forth until the reservoir was empty.

But the fire burned too hot, and too fast. Warning chimes sounded in his visor, the heat rising to dangerous levels. He cast about himself in desperation. Galerius was kicking in futility against the flames. Tolliver's armour was alight.

'Get out!' Galerius shouted. 'Save yourself!'

It was the only way out of this nightmare. There was nothing more that

Esau could do.

‘Forgive me, brothers!’ he roared, hurling the spent flamer aside. He powered through the rising inferno towards the hull breach, and leapt out.

It was not a clean jump. His pack turbines struck the ragged edge of the bulkhead, jerking him into a spiralling tumble as the rushing wind snatched him away.

Then he was clear. He was in freefall.

The altitude’s chill leeched the heat from his scorched armour in seconds, and he struggled to orient himself towards the clouds below. The gunship’s embattled flight had brought them well into the airspace over Tamuero. He could see the city’s interceptor guns stitching the skies with fire, but of the Scythes’ two Stormtalon escorts, there was no sign.

He turned his head, following the Storm Eagle as it whirled ever downwards. Flames and burning bodies tumbled from the damaged hold, and he dearly wished he could convince himself that it was only tyranids he saw amongst them...

There was a flash as the backdraught caught the fuel tanks. The resulting explosion tore the gunship to pieces, scattering fiery debris across the clouds.

A huge shadow passed overhead.

Esau quickly angled his body to face the other direction, to catch any glimpse of whatever new horror awaited him. ‘Oh, holy Terra...’ he murmured.

It was not the great, wounded beast that had plucked them from the air, but its twin. A harridan, like a gargoyle writ large – its immense wings broader than those of a Thunderhawk transporter, its barbed tail whipping behind it as it rode the thermal currents up there in the unclouded light of the Brakur suns, seeking to feast upon its foes.

Evidently, its hungry gaze had settled upon Esau.

It roared to the winds, before folding its pinions and sinuously diving after the lone, falling Space Marine.

This was some hellish new game of predator and prey unfolding across the heavens. Esau did not spare another backward glance, but tucked in his arms and fired the turbines of his jump pack.

He sped down towards the cloud cover, accelerating hard. The pack could

not keep him aloft, but it was perfect for boosting or slowing his descent, or angling it as required. It was doubtful that he could outrun such a creature for long, one that had been bred to flight as the harridans were – but it would buy him precious seconds to think, and the obscuring banks of cloud precious seconds more.

He levelled out and then cut back his thrust to almost nothing, feeling his stomachs yawning as gravity took hold once more. His vision was an almost complete whiteout among the clouds.

The beast's roar came only a fraction of second before it soared past. Esau could not twist aside in time, and was clipped by an armoured, bony dorsal crest, throwing him into a new spin. He spread his arms wide to arrest the uncontrolled motion, only to break out into the open sky beneath the cloud cover, right on the monster's tail. It almost seemed to be mirroring his movements in the broad sweep of its wings as it tried to circle back around to catch him.

The anti-air fire from the city below was becoming more focused and intense. They would be tracking the new target, coming in hard from high altitude, and likely prioritising it as a threat over the tens of thousands of smaller warrior-forms that darkened the skies of Brakur IV. Esau had no desire to be blasted from the heavens by friendly guns, even if the slaying of this monstrous creature would avenge the loss of his squad brethren in some way.

No – he would much rather live to witness its death. The problem was, between the heavens and the city below, he had nowhere else to hide.

'Come for me then, beast!' he cried, fumbling with the hilt of his chainsword.

A flak shell detonated beneath the harridan's exposed belly, eliciting a howl of pain. Another burst nearby. The gunners on the ground were finding their range, the shrapnel scoring xenos flesh and the flank of Esau's battleplate alike. Seizing upon the moment of distraction, he veered off hard to the right, but the harridan lunged for his outstretched legs and turned inside of his tightest possible trajectory, carrying it clear of the interceptor fire.

From there, it would easily snatch him up in its jaws. It roared as it made to lunge again.

The vox crackled in Esau's ear. *'Dive, brother!'*

Without looking back, he folded and dropped just as Brother Galerius opened fire from above him and in the opposite direction. A flurry of bolt pistol shots tore into the harridan's plated hide as the veteran soared over Esau's shoulders, keeping tight to its outstretched neck. Almost as an afterthought, he struck at the great beast's crested skull with his own blade as he passed, chipping the bony armour and causing the monster to recoil and howl in annoyance.

Esau raised his helm. *'Oh, you've really got its attention now!'*

*'Steady your descent,'* Galerius called back. *'Between us, we'll lead it back into range of the guns.'*

The other warrior fired his pack and rolled away to the left. Sure enough, the harridan bellowed its fury and swept down to give chase, snapping at his heels.

*'By the Kraken's unholy teeth! Be quick about it, brother!'*

Not daring to question his good fortune, nor how Galerius had escaped from the gunship, Esau drew his own pistol and re-angled himself to follow in the creature's wake. The veteran had given up trying to taunt it, instead using every reflex he possessed to keep just a few metres ahead of its jaws, and so Esau stung its rear quarters with a handful of well-aimed shots.

As the single-minded creature recoiled, he overshot it, trading places with Galerius once more.

*'This way!'* he cried. *'Make for the tall habs!'*

The cityscape of Tamuero spread from horizon to horizon beneath them. Esau could see winged xenos creatures flocking between the spires, though they were outnumbered by the sheer hordes of tyranids engaged against the human defenders on the ground. Firefights raged in the streets, with every intersection becoming a contested kill-zone.

But it was the anti-air support that the two Scythes were counting on.

Goaded by their bolt pistol shots and carefully timed, criss-crossing flight paths, the harridan breached the effective ceiling of the ward district's emplaced guns for the second and final time.

Autocannon fire pierced its wings in a dozen places, and scored red blooms in the softer meat of its belly. Flak shells tore through its bony armour, shredding its muscles. The beast spasmed in the air once, twice, then folded to one side and went limp.

Its bulky carcass sailed down past Esau as he jinked away from another trail of interceptor fire. He spared it a backward glance as it crashed through the upper levels of a municipal stack, hurling shattered masonry to the choked roadways below, before slewing through the glassaic roof of a squat Administratum building. He turned to Galerius, who was arcing around in a wide, descending circle overhead, and they exchanged a clenched salute of victory.

Esau smiled grimly behind his visor, looking back to where the harridan lay with its spine broken amidst the rubble, and opened a vox-channel.

‘This is Brother Esau of the Scythes of the Emperor, to local Brakuran forces. Good shooting. We will confirm the kill. If you could cease firing at *us* now, we would very much appreciate it.’

To his surprise, the channel chimed with a response almost instantly.

*‘Brother Esau, this is Apothecary Aratus. Forget looking for xenos trophies. We must evacuate immediately.’*

Less than half a kilometre from the ruined Administratum building was the temporary facility established by the Chapter for recruit screening. Though gunfire echoed through the streets outside and great campanile bells tolled in warning, within the armoured walls of the strongpoint could still be found a measure of safety from the tyranid invaders. Heavy auto-turrets built into the gate approaches tracked back and forth, readily able to distinguish Esau and Galerius from potential xenos infiltrators.

Apothecary Aratus met them at the barricaded entrance, at the top of a wide set of stone steps. Empty shell casings and gritty debris crunched underfoot.

The Apothecary looked from one warrior to the other, and back again. He frowned.

‘Is this it, Galerius? Where is the rest of your squad? Where is Brother-Sergeant Cassander?’

Galerius mag-sheathed his chainsword and removed his laurelled helm, gulping at the dusty air. The entire left side of his face was swollen and blistered, the neck seal of his battleplate evidently broken by the fire on board the Storm Eagle.

‘We were intercepted before we even made our combat drop,’ he said. ‘Damned xenos snatched the gunship right out of the air.’ He ran his

tongue over his teeth and spat a gobbet of red-tinged saliva onto the steps. 'I've never seen anything like it. These beasts are fast, faster than usual. And agile too. Young Esau and I barely made it down here.'

Aratus sagged, casting a glance back over his shoulder into the requisitioned building's interior. 'It's *Daedalus*,' he muttered. 'The hive ship – its broods are hyper-evolved for flight, and aerial engagements. Who knows what kind of prey-worlds it must have feasted on to achieve that level of genic specialisation. I've been here since before the invasion began, but these winged hordes seem to be without end. Honestly, there is no way that the defenders can hold out much longer. It is regrettable. We had over a hundred potential recruits, far more than the gene-seed stocks I brought with me...'

He turned to Esau.

'And I realised I know you too, brother. Your name sounded familiar. I fitted your eye, after Miral Prime. You've come a fair way since then, though. How is it serving you?'

Esau did not remove his helmet. He wanted to maintain some distance from the Apothecary for the purposes of their mission, and just a little emotional detachment, even if fate seemed determined to test him in that regard.

'It is an acceptable replacement. You have my gratitude,' he replied. 'The focus is sharp, the resolution of the pict-captures more than adequate. I would say, however, it feels a little small in the socket – may I ask, where did you obtain it?'

Aratus pursed his lips. 'You don't really want to know the answer to that, brother. Come now. We are wasting time.'

He led them into the strongpoint, through a grand reception hall now fallen to ruin, then past rooms filled with empty archive shelves and uneven rows of scribe stations. Galerius twitched at the sight of civilians cowering in the unlit recesses.

'What was this place?' he asked. 'Before you arrived, what was its purpose? It seems too well defended to be a librarium, too scholarly for a medicae centre.'

Aratus did not turn. 'A local precinct house for the Adeptus Arbites. The sector marshal turned it over to us without question when we arrived.'

Slowing at one of the many side alcoves to examine the defaced statue of

an Imperial saint bearing a symbolic set of scales, Esau noted the scraps of parchment trodden into the tiled floor by innumerable feet. ‘But there haven’t been any Arbitrators stationed here for some time, by the look of things.’

‘No. There was some sort of uprising on Brakur Dominus a few years ago, and the enforcers from this precinct house were reposted to the system’s cardinal world instead. Although I don’t know as that will help, now, once the Kraken reaches them.’

The bells still pealed out their alarum from the towers far above. The Apothecary halted at a secure door, and punched a code into the lock.

‘Look, I didn’t know if the Chapter would get here in time, so I worked out the best exit strategy I could. As it happens, it seems that’s all we have left. There’s an Onager lighter craft on standby on the pad above us – it’s been out of action since the Arbitrators left. I got a couple of local techs to get it running again, in exchange for passage off-world with us. I hope they don’t think it too raw a deal, when they find out Chapter Master Thracian’s policy on refugees.’

The door clanked open, to reveal a step down into a cellblock annex. Four anxious looking human serfs in a mixture of medicae garb and surplus security gear jumped to their feet, clearly charged with protecting the two sealed cryo-caskets in the centre of the low chamber.

Galerius shot Esau a cautious look. The gene-seed. This was their primary objective.

Aratus continued, gesturing to one of his attendants. ‘Nalyatov here has flight training, says he can get us to a rendezvous with the *Atreides*. Recall your Stormtalon escorts, and we’ll make a run for it right now.’

‘I doubt that’s possible,’ Galerius sighed, replacing his helmet. ‘We lost track of them on the way down. If they survived the attack, they will likely have returned to the *Atreides*, beyond comms range.’

The Apothecary rounded on them. ‘You “*lost track*” of your escort gunships?’

‘We had other things on our mind, brother!’ Esau growled. ‘Like the xenos brood-mothers trying to rip us to pieces!’

Aratus glared at him, then became aware that Galerius had stepped quietly to inspect the gene-seed containers. The Apothecary edged between them, also shielding the closest of his trembling human aides.

‘I know what this is, brothers. I know you’re only here for the cryo-caskets, and if there’s room for Brother Aratus then so much the better, yes? I’ve been in your position before, tasked by Thracian to ensure the future of the Scythes of the Emperor above all else. But you tell me your gunship is gone, and your squad too. The only orbital craft we still have can carry the gene-seed, all of us, and the two techs as well. Why do you need to leave these honoured servants to die, their years of expertise lost, just because your mission parameters did not include their survival?’

He drew up straighter, placing a proprietorial hand upon one of the caskets. Through the frosted glass, the dark shadows of its contents could almost be seen.

‘Just because we are ordered to do something does not make it *right*,’ he added.

Esau glanced around the annex.

His conscience prickled. The Apothecary’s words made sense. Esau could feel the eyes of these helpless mortals upon him, and upon the chainsword at his hip.

He looked to Galerius. The veteran shrugged. ‘We would still be completing our mission as stated...’ he murmured, evidently of the same mind.

Aratus nodded, but let out a long sigh as he took up his own chain-blade and helm. ‘Well, brothers, we’re all goodly souls after all. The problem is, the Onager is an unarmed cargo lighter, and the second of *Daedalus*’ harridan-spawn you brought with you is still circling the city, like it has your scent. The defence force gunners report it as too high for them to engage – without an escort, we’ll be easy prey once we get anywhere near it.’

Esau eyed their precious cargo. Not only the cryo-caskets, but the human serfs too.

‘We could leave Tamuero airspace, and find a clearer path to orbit,’ he suggested. ‘That’s how we came in.’

Galerius shook his head. ‘The smaller tyrannid swarms would be all over us in minutes. We need cover from the ground to get us anywhere near the stratosphere. That’s assuming the repaired lighter holds out, and our man Nalyatov doesn’t steer us into a hab-spire on the way up.’ He nodded towards the serf. ‘No offence, Nalyatov.’

Esau took a deep breath. He thought of Cassander, Sorgn and the others, and he knew what had to be done.

‘Well we aren’t escaping anything, stood down here,’ he said grimly. ‘Let’s break for orbit under cover of the interceptor guns, and we’ll deal with the xenos as and when.’

The three Space Marines threw out their fists in the old Sothan reaper’s salute, and Galerius drew his pistol. ‘Aye. We will be the blade, brother.’

The Onager was a variant of the workhorse Arvus-class shuttle, found in Naval service across the length and breadth of the Imperium, though it was unclear how this battered old specimen had ended up on the landing pad of a Brakuran precinct house. The cargo hold was far smaller than that of a Chapter Storm Eagle, and built for mortal dimensions. Even so, the serfs had managed to cram the two bulky cryo-caskets in behind the pilot’s compartment, while they themselves filled the bench seats down either side. They fastened stale rebreather masks over their mouths and noses, against the risk of decompression at altitude or in the near void.

The engines guttered and strained as the craft lifted off. From where he stood astride one of the secured containers, with his bare head and armoured shoulders filling the tight observation dome in the ceiling, Aratus’ attention was stolen away. A huge, flaring blast of green bio-plasma lit up the sky some three kilometres to the west.

‘Throne...’ he gasped, ‘The perimeter of the Third Ward has fallen...’

Galerius and Esau were crouched one behind the other towards the back of the shuttle, right up against the sealed drop-ramp. Their bulky jump packs prevented them from standing at all, or indeed turning *around* in the narrow confines of the hold, and so they had edged in backwards to face out with Esau in the rearmost position.

Just in case.

Unable to see what the Apothecary was seeing, he called back into the hold behind him. ‘What’s going on out there? Do we still have our route?’

The city was being overrun, in scenes that were doubtlessly being played out all over the besieged continent. This was the beginning of the end for Brakur IV. Soon the defenders’ guns would fall silent beneath the weight of the Kraken’s assault, both on the ground and in the air.

But not yet. Nalyatov struggled to haul the Onager around, the force of

their rumbling ascent dragging on their bodies as the shuttle slowly began to climb and gather speed.

A huge explosion at street level a few blocks away tore through the foundations of one of the immense, tottering spires. The structure sagged as it fell, streaming rubble and what might have been tiny, flailing bodies from the uppermost levels. Vast clouds of masonry dust billowed out over the city beneath them, forcing the serf pilot to bank hard away.

The ever-present rolling thunder of the guns grew as the shuttle climbed further still. Shrieking flocks of winged creatures filled the air, yet the Onager used the covering fire to find a path through them.

The hold was soon lit by the bright Brakur suns through the crystalflex dome over Aratus' head. They had broken the cloud cover into the skies beyond, only now there were scores of fiery contrails streaking towards the surface, if not hundreds – the next, overwhelming stage of *Daedalus'* assimilation of this doomed world.

The Apothecary darted his gaze left and right, scanning the horizon. 'Nalyatov, head south-south-west, engines to maximum. Keep trying to raise the *Atreides*. I don't see our—'

He froze. His eyes widened.

'By the reaper's grin, that beast is huge! Harridan brood-mother, coming right at us out of the sun! Take evasive action!'

Over the howl of the engines as the Onager veered unevenly from side to side, the approaching creature's roar could be heard even within the sealed hold. Galerius thumped the metal-grilled floor in frustration.

'Damn it, you can't outrun it in this old wreck! We need to strike now if we're going to have any sort of chance.'

Esau gritted his teeth and reached for the ramp controls.

'This is it, brothers,' he said, releasing the locks. 'Honoured servants, strap in tight. And close your eyes. That's an order.'

As soon as the ramp lowered even just a few centimetres, the roar of depressurisation became one with the roar of the wind. Up here, the air was thin.

Galerius rapped Esau on the back of his leg. 'Are you sure about this? We could take it together, just like the first one.'

Esau kept his eyes on the steadily falling lip of the ramp, revealing the riven sky beyond.

‘No, brother – your pack’s reserves won’t last long enough to bring you back, even if we did. And if all else fails, I’ll lead it away from the shuttle. They will need you here in case anything *worse* comes along afterwards.’

The veteran let out an exasperated cry, then rapped on his leg again. ‘Fine, but you are a terrible liar, Esau. Now get ready.’

The harridan swept into view. The old, familiar hatred began to growl in Esau’s gullet at the sight of it – gaining rapidly, beating its wings hard to match the Onager’s slewing flight. He could even make out the gaps in its fanged maw where Sergeant Cassander’s pack had mauled it.

With a hydraulic clank, the ramp locked open. The beast roared.

Esau kicked off hard with both legs, launching himself straight towards it.

He flew through the air like an armoured missile, not even needing to fire his jump pack to carry him from the shuttle’s open bay. The harridan actually flinched as he hurtled past its head and over the left wing, faltering for just a moment before diving on after the Onager.

And then Esau was past it, tumbling down in the wake.

‘*No...!*’ he cried, struggling to turn himself against the weakly rising thermals. He realised that had misjudged the leap, and now faced another plunge to the surface of Brakur IV.

He had failed. The harridan was only seconds away from the fleeing shuttle, slowed by the drag of its open ramp.

Then, in a moment of apparent insanity, Esau saw his chance.

He fired his turbines, shooting forwards and ramming himself bodily into the harridan’s serpentine back, right behind the hunch of its broad, pinioned shoulders. He barely managed to grab hold of the horned chitin plates protecting its spine.

The creature thrashed from side to side, howling and bellowing, bucking its body like an unbroken, monstrous steed as it tried to dislodge him. Esau held on as tightly as he could, only then realising that he had not planned anything beyond this last, desperate act.

‘I’m going nowhere!’ he bellowed through his vox-grille, mostly at his reluctant mount. ‘You’ll not shake me! I’ll steer you into the ground if I have to!’

He caught movement at the corner of his vision. From between the

segmented plates on the beast's back, smaller creatures were spawning into the battle. These grotesque, newborn gargoyles hooted and hissed as they pulled themselves free with withered claw-limbs, regarding Esau as a threat to their brood-mother and nesting place if nothing else, and swarming over its undulating hide towards him.

'Get back, you *filth!*' Esau cursed, keeping his grip with his left hand and drawing his chainsword from its sheath-clasp. He swiped at the closest gargoyle, cleaving the head from its scrawny neck and letting the limp body tumble away. More of them came, firing their weapon analogues and spitting angry, yellow globs of bio-acidic drool that flew wide in the rushing wind. He slashed at them again and again.

Even so, there were too many of them. They could rush him in numbers, dragging his grip away and casting him to the air once more.

From the shuttle, Galerius called out over the vox. '*Esau! You magnificent madman! Let us take some of these horrors off your platter!*'

The open cargo hold lit up with the muzzle flare of bolt pistol shots, joined a moment later by someone's plundered las-carbine. Accuracy was virtually impossible, and such small arms could never hope to harm a beast like the harridan – but they kept it agitated and off-balance.

And they *could* harm the gargoyles. A bolt shell blasted one creature apart at Esau's shoulder, spattering his visor with xenos blood, and another was winged as it tried to scramble out of harm's way.

Aratus was speaking to the pilot. '*Brothers, we are running out of time. Nalyatov reports more winged tyranid warrior-forms converging from the north. We must flee, for the gene-seed's sake.*'

Resigned to his fate, Esau gestured to the heavens. 'I have this, Apothecary. I will distract the beast and lure it away myself. Close the ramp and head for the rendezvous.'

*'Go well, brother. You will not be forgotten.'*

Esau braced his feet and hauled himself up with one hand. He kept his profile as low as he could to lessen the immense buffeting of the wind, holding his chainsword tightly and eyeing the flexing, alien musculature of the harridan's back. He was trying to picture the sinuous movements of the creature's flight as it dived after the Onager, waiting for the optimum moment to make his escape.

He paused. With each downward beat of its wings, he saw the harridan's

exoskeletal plates separate by just a few fingers' breadth to reveal the taut cartilage beneath.

It was a narrow gap. Would it be enough?

'Wait, Aratus,' he voxed, 'I'm going to try something.'

*'Make it fast! Sixty seconds to enemy intercept!'*

'Confirmed. Have Nalyatov ready for full thrust on my mark.'

Esau pulled the strap of frag grenades from his belt. They were intended to maim and disperse lightly armoured infantry, or clear a dropsite, but he fancied that all three stuffed into an enclosed space could hurt even a tyrannid of this great size. He added his only krak charge for good measure.

But he would need to time it perfectly. He counted down under his breath.

'Five. Four. Three. Arm... and drop! Go, go, go!'

He thrust the grenades in, dropped his chainsword, crossed his arms in front of his visor and pushed as hard as he could off the harridan's back. The wind jerked him away in an instant.

All four charges detonated at once. Shards of bloody chitin flew through the air, the great beast howling as the blast sheared through the joint of its fore-shoulder. The right wing buckled and folded, and the harridan contorted around the wound, enraged and agonised in equal measure. Its writhing convulsions dislodged many of its gargoyle brood, scattering more of them to the wind, bleating in fear. Esau ignited his jump pack in a short burst to carry him clear above the disoriented flock, then levelled out.

The harridan tried to right itself, sweeping both wings down hard.

The strain was too much. With a sickening, meaty *snap*, its damaged pinion broke clean off at the shoulder in a welter of vital fluids.

Esau and his brethren spat curses after the crippled brood-mother as it went whirling to destruction, the cheers of the human passengers clearly audible over the open vox-channel. The lone warrior hung in the rarefied air, on the border between the sky and the low void beyond it, and watched the Onager shuttle powering away from him on its path to orbit. Fuel warnings were chiming across his visor display from the faltering jump pack turbines.

He saw the armoured form of Galerius desperately beckoning to him from the open ramp. *'Brother! Give it everything you have! We can allow you a few seconds more!'*

The shuttle's engines darkened, the craft's escape velocity dipping marginally.

Esau didn't hesitate. He opened the pack thrusters to full, aiming his trajectory up and over the soaring shuttle.

Then his reserves were spent. For the space of a few heartbeats, he felt almost weightless against the infinite horizon before his powered leap guttered into one final, sprawling tumble into gravity's deadly clutches.

He had judged the angle almost perfectly, instinctively accounting for the arc of his path and the movement of the Onager relative to it.

Almost perfectly.

Almost.

Within ten metres of the open hold, he realised that he wasn't going to make it. He was going to fall short of the ramp's edge by what could have been only a few centimetres, but might as well have been an entire world away.

His open gauntlets clawed at the empty air. He felt the wash of the shuttle engines, so tantalisingly close. He saw the faces of the human passengers strapped down to the bench seats, their expressions of vertiginous terror frozen in that moment.

Galerius' powerful gauntlet closed around his wrist.

With an almighty roar of exertion, his boots mag-locked to the interior hull, the veteran heaved Esau another arms-length up, allowing him to scramble over the lip and into the hold.

The two of them lay panting on the deck as the ramp ratcheted closed behind them. Esau's twin hearts thundered in his ears, and he realised that he could not have stood even if he had wanted to. The older warrior pulled off his laurelled helm and let it clatter to one side.

'That was...' he gasped, manage a wide smile. 'That was an untidy landing... brother... You should... work on that...'

Esau released his jump pack harness and rolled onto his hands and knees. Out beyond Nalyatov's cramped cockpit space, he could see the flame-streaked blue sky darkening into the void ahead of them – and the first bio-ships of the tyrannid swarm that hung against it. The shuttle bumped and struggled with the ascent, but Aratus, holding a communicator to his lips, was scanning the wide curve of Brakur IV's planetary thermopause.

'Calling strike cruiser *Atreides*, strike cruiser *Atreides*, please respond.

This is Brother-Apothecary Aratus, for outbound Onager shuttle. We request immediate assistance. We have the gene-seed. Repeat, we have the gene-seed.'

The vox crackled. The tyrannid assault was still interfering with their transmissions.

'Repeat, strike cruiser *Atreides*, this is—'

A reply came through, strong and clear. '*Onager shuttle, this is Atreides-actual. We have your signal, dispatching a 'Talon escort to bring you in.'*

Esau and Galerius both recognised the voice of Shipmistress Hannelore. Curiously, she sounded distracted. Fraught, even.

*'Be advised – we are engaging xenos vessels, to buy Sergeant Quintos more time. Keep back. Maintain safe distance.'*

Galerius rose to his feet. 'Look,' he murmured. 'It's *Daedalus*.'

The monstrous hive ship had clawed its way closer to Brakur Dominus, taking the majority of its void-swarm with it. The *Atreides* grazed the upper edge, its guns forcing the more wary xenos back but having little effect on the larger and more determined bio-ships.

Esau gritted his teeth. He knew that the war against Hive Fleet Kraken was far from over.

# TERMINAL VELOCITY



Wreckage. I am ensnared.

Kick free. Roll left.

Lateral spin. *Ground, sky, ground, sky, ground, sky.*

Arms spread. Steer with legs.

*Ground, sky, ground, sky, sky, ground, ground, ground, ground.*

Angle descent, adjusting trajectory. Altitude, fourteen thousand and seventy-two metres and falling.

Falling.

Falling.

My auto-senses dull the roar of the air to nothing more than faint white noise.

Problem. Visor display shows damage to left thruster. Fuel leaking like a comet tail behind me. Cannot fire my jump pack.

The Storm Eagle spirals downwards some fifteen hundred metres away. Its engines are burned out, its internal bays open to the atmosphere.

It's shedding bodies. Ragged xenos and a handful of limp, armoured forms.

Emperor speed you on your way, brothers.

Comms are inoperative. Altitude, twelve thousand eight hundred and

sixteen metres and falling.

*Falling.*

Recall emergency procedures. Disengage safeties. One, two. Check armament. Lost my blade. Bolt pistol mag-locked to right thigh.

Confirm final disengage. Deactivate fail-safe.

Release.

The jump pack snaps free, the trailing harness-web tugging me into a new half-spin.

Arms spread. Head back. *Ground, sky, ground, ground.*

The pack tumbles past me, still leaking wispy fuel as it falls. It looks much smaller now, whirling towards the infinite horizon.

Combat assessment: my transport has been attacked. My squad is unaccounted for, presumed killed-in-action. I am in freefall, two-point-eight kilometres from the designated drop-point.

Local geography: urban sprawl, ninety-four metres above relative sea level. Enemy-held territory.

Adjust altitude reading accordingly.

A bright flash. A concussion wave, and a booming detonation as the stricken Storm Eagle's fuel tanks catch. The explosion sears the heavens, lighting up the cloud cover below and scattering the remains of her fuselage over a wide area.

One amongst many. Who knew that the tyrannids could gain air-superiority over the mighty Imperium so effortlessly?

Sudden impact to my left shoulder.

Spinning. Spinning. Corrected.

It is a piece of the drop-rail. Brother Tolliver still hangs lifelessly from his pack, locked in position and ready for the jump that never came. He has lost his helm, and his short, white hair whips in the howling gale.

Another pack is locked two spaces behind him. The bisected remains of Brother Kenai dangle half out of the harness like a mangled puppet.

No, not *remains*.

Kenai claws at the rail with bloody gauntlets. His body has not yet realised the extent of the damage that has been inflicted upon it.

I try to raise him on the vox, or even by battle-sign, but he is too far gone. He is being dragged down by Tolliver and the drop-rail, even though he will not likely survive all the way to the ground. Not with that level of

blood loss.

In desperation, he fires his jump pack.

There is a bright flare and the rail begins to spin like a firework, driven by Kenai's frantic thrust. I dive to the right, angling and slowing my fall to avoid them.

They spin faster, and faster still. I pray that Kenai blacks out before the end.

His pack detonates, taking most of the rail and Tolliver with it. Someone's severed arm hits me solidly in the face.

*Ground, sky, ground, sky.*

Arms spread. Corrected.

Altitude, seven thousand, four hundred and eighty-one metres and falling.

In the moment, I struggle to recall my training. The correct procedures feel... counterintuitive. I draw my bolt pistol, and confirm the full magazine.

*Be the blade, as well as the hand that wields it.*

Everything blurs to white as I breach the cloud cover, moisture beading across my helmet's retinal lenses. The visor display appears to hang against a murky, blank page before my eyes.

Suddenly, inexplicably, my armour's systems manage to lock on to the local strategic network. My tactical readouts are updated.

The xenos are swarming into the Second Ward. They must have sniffed out our true intentions, and are converging upon all potential ground evacuation points.

They are millions-strong. Without air support, we will not prevail.

My vision clears. I see the cityscape below me, overlaid with the most recent mapping in friendly green and hostile red.

So much red.

Altitude, four thousand, one hundred and twenty-one metres and falling.

A murder-flock of winged beasts takes flight from the shattered upper levels of a ruined mega-hab to the south. They are the smaller, grotesque creatures, barking and shrieking their alien calls into the sky, though their sheer number casts a shadow upon the wide streets below.

Targeting. Lock. Fire.

Targeting. Lock. Fire.

I am upon them, and then *through* them. Leathery wings slap against me,

startled yelps and the breaking of their wiry bodies piercing the white noise in my ears.

Turning with a twist of my armoured limbs, I loose two more shots back up into the brood before they even know what has hit them. They circle, confused and angry, before continuing on their way.

I roll over again. I can no longer see sky at the horizon.

The largest of the tyranid bio-constructs stalk the avenues and plazas of the city, surrounded by their smaller cousins. The perspective is confusing; for a moment, I feel like a model-maker surveying the miniature angles of a great tableau, with my perfect and imperfect creations arrayed for battle upon its surface.

Then the moment passes and the very real metropolis rises up to greet me.

Altitude, two thousand and eighty-nine metres and falling.

My visor locks onto the enemy at ground level. Not the larger constructs now, but those it classifies as ‘infantry’. Still technically out of bolt pistol range, my ever-optimistic battleplate nonetheless urges me to engage them.

With a flick of my pauldrons, I aim for the widest open space I can see, and raise my weapon to the horde below.

No lock. Fire.

No lock. Fire.

No lock. Fire.

Each shot means death for something, some as yet unseen beast at ground level. I fire indiscriminately, until the shape of a worthier target resolves in my vision.

It is a living tank. A loathsome screamer-killer.

I fire again and again, knowing full well that my bolt shells cannot pierce its chitinous hide.

Then the ratchet lever locks back, the pistol’s magazine spent.

No matter. My body is a weapon.

*Be the blade.*

Point-five-eight metric tonnes of genhanced flesh, smooth ceramite, cold plasteel and unyielding adamantium. I am like a living meteorite. My mass and velocity will be my final gifts to the Emperor.

Altitude, three hundred and forty-eight metres.

I make one last correction to my trajectory, and pull my arms in tight to my sides. My target is all that I can see.

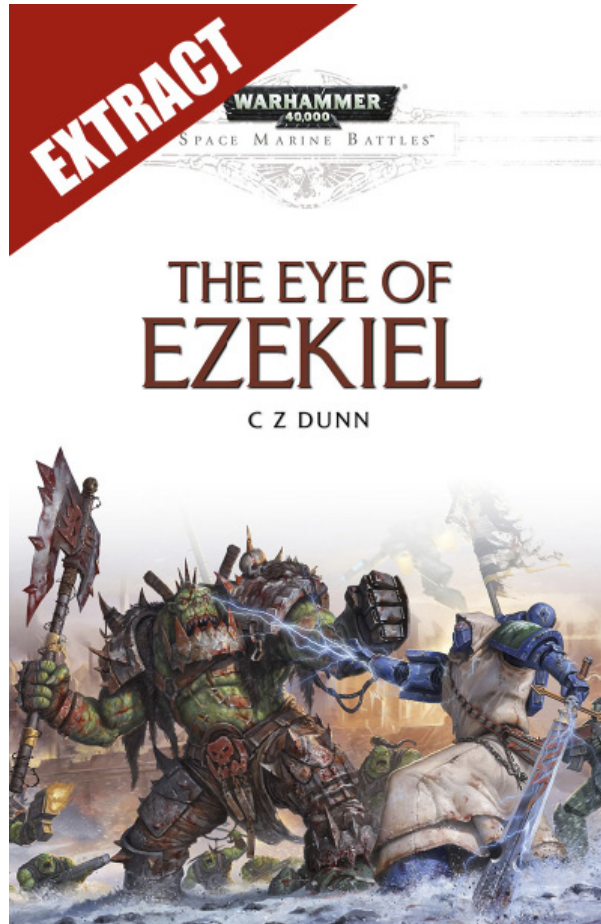
Give me a smile, you unholy bast-

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**L J Goulding** is the author of the Horus Heresy audio drama *The Heart of the Pharos*, while for Space Marine Battles he has written the novel *Slaughter at Giant's Coffin* and the audio drama *Mortarion's Heart*. His audio drama *Daedalus* also features the Scythes of the Emperor, along with the short stories 'The Aegidan Oath', 'Heloth', 'Reclamation' and 'Terminal Velocity'. His other Warhammer 40,000 short stories include 'The Lords of Borsis', 'Kaldor Draigo: Knight of Titan' and 'Shield of Baal: The Word of the Silent King'. He lives and works in Los Angeles, California.



An extract from [\*The Eye of Ezekiel\*](#).



Danatheum brought up the psychic barrier just in time to absorb the burst of gauss that had been fired out of the darkness of the catacombs. Bright green energy clashed with a wall of purple aetheric unmatter, sickening pyrotechnics piercing the gloom.

The necron raised its weapon to fire a second time but a bolt shell was already clear of the Librarian's pistol, racing unerringly towards the xenos' metal skull. It impacted explosively, turning the thing's ghoulish face into a void, and the necron fell backwards, attempting to regenerate. The Grand Master of the Librarius was on it in an instant, driving Traitor's Bane down through its ribcage, twisting the blade and pulling it clear, entwined with sinew and circuit.

As he wiped the mechanical detritus from his sword, the hooded figure alongside him nodded in approval.

'A fine kill, Grand Master. I look forward to rejoining the fray soon myself.' The other Librarian's voice was distant and reedy. Danatheum signalled and twenty black-armoured figures of the Ravenwing peeled themselves away from the dark and charged past him down the subterranean corridor. Moments later the catacombs lit up again with muzzle flare as the two squads engaged yet more necrons.

'And soon you shall, Ezekiel, but not in the depths of Aryand. Your return to battle lies on a different field altogether.'

'I do not understand, Grand Master. The Apothecaries have cleared me for combat and you yourself submitted me to psychic probing before you

left on your mission, and declared me fully recovered.’ Ezekiel’s voice was noticeably raised, but it did not echo from the ancient stone tunnels, carved millennia before by the workers of the Nephrekh Dynasty.

‘None of that has changed. Rephial assures me that you have fully recovered from your wounds, and my assessment was sound. I believe you *are* fit to take your place alongside your brother Dark Angels, but you will not be joining me here.’

The two Librarians rounded a corner and Danatheum picked his way through the inert necrons carpeting the tunnel floor, burnished gold heads and limbs scattered around them, shorn off in the Ravenwing’s firestorm. Further ahead, the chorus of bolters struck up again as the brothers of the Second Company encountered yet more of the undead xenos.

‘Then I am to receive new orders?’

Unseen by either Librarian, one of the necron corpses they had passed by began to twitch, the gauss flayer in its hand glowing faintly as it powered up.

‘You are to take Fifth Company to a world called Honoria at the very fringes of Segmentum Obscuras. For millennia, the subsector it resides in has been cut off by warp storms, but now that they have abated a vast ork army threatens to overrun it. A score of worlds have already fallen to the greenskins, but Honoria must—’

Behind them, the darkness blossomed into green light as the necron discharged its weapon, the dank air of the tunnel crackling as it burned off under the immense heat. Danatheum reacted quickest, throwing himself against an immaculately hewn stone wall and bringing his bolt pistol to bear in a single, fluid movement. Ezekiel remained motionless, the necron’s shot passing harmlessly through his midriff before impacting against a wall further along the tunnel. The noise was swiftly drowned out by the report of Danatheum’s bolt pistol as it took the metal head from the xenos’ shoulders.

‘I do not understand, Grand Master,’ Ezekiel said, as if nothing had happened. ‘If the world has been cut off for so long then how did they know how to make contact with the Imperium?’

‘The request for aid came not from Honoria but Mars.’

‘The Adeptus Mechanicus? What interest do they have in this world?’

‘That I do not know, but it must be of the utmost import to them as they

have invoked the Pact of Kulgotha to secure our aid.'

'It has been less than a century since they last held us to our oath. Surely the sacrifices we made on Faze V released us from the Pact?'

'I'm certain that we have repaid the Mechanicus tenfold in the eight thousand years since we made our bargain, but an oath is an oath and the sons of the Lion always pay their debts. I do not need your powers of foresight to see the darkness that lies ahead for humanity.'

Ezekiel blinked involuntarily.

'We would do well to placate what few allies we have left,' Danatheum continued. 'Master Serpicus travels with you, does he not?'

'Master Serpicus forms part of the command squad, yes.'

'Good. Perhaps his pleasant nature and boundless patience will help forge even stronger bonds between the Rock and Mars,' Danatheum said dryly.

'You have met Master Serpicus, haven't you, Grand Master?' Ezekiel replied with a smile.

Side by side, the two Librarians came to the end of the tunnel, where it opened into a high-ceilinged chamber. Bolter fire echoed from where the Ravenwing, reinforced by elements of the Fourth Company, who had taken a different route to the throne chamber, were now engaged with a host of Lychguard. Danatheum raised his bolt pistol and lent his firepower to the rapidly escalating battle. Ezekiel merely looked on.

'There is another matter I would like you to attend to, Ezekiel,' Danatheum said, drawing Traitor's Bane and bifurcating a golden-armoured necron that had broken through the Dark Angels' lines. The two halves clattered to the smooth stone floor, the Grand Master of the Librarius emptying an entire clip into the twitching corpse before it could repair and reanimate itself.

'What is it, Grand Master?'

'Seventh Squad of First Company is no longer at full strength,' Danatheum said solemnly. 'The time has come for another brother to ascend to the Deathwing.'

'Brother Joadar...?'

'Succumbed to his wounds three nights ago. The punishment his body endured on Korsh finally proved too much for him.'

Ezekiel closed his eyes briefly. He had led the mission to Korsh himself and barely escaped with his own life, and the lives of the Deathwing

brothers he had taken into battle. The daemon he fought there had already taken so much from him personally and, nearly a year on, three Dark Angels still remained under the care of the Chapter Apothecaries.

‘Who does the Supreme Grand Master have in mind?’ Ezekiel said as he watched Danatheum carve through another necron.

‘Balthasar. He has an exemplary battle record and a keen mind. Azrael endorses him and he has already started asking questions.’

‘And is one of those questions, “Why do we tolerate psykers among our ranks?”’

‘We are all shaped by our past, Ezekiel. You know that better than most. Balthasar and the world he grew up on suffered at the hands of the warp-touched. It is up to the likes of you and I to show him that our Emperor-bestowed gifts can be used for the benefit of the Chapter.’ To emphasise his point, Danatheum raised a psychic shield in front of a Ravenwing brother who was about to be ripped apart by a Lychguard’s scythe. The weapon bounced harmlessly off the aetheric wall, spinning the necron around and exposing its flank. The grateful Dark Angel revved up his chainsword and carved through the robot-like xenos’ torso the instant Danatheum dropped the shield.

‘I shall do my best, Grand Master, though I would prefer we waited until Fifth Company returns to the Rock so that you could carry out the assessment yourself. You have been the one to judge the worthiness of Deathwing aspirants for centuries, whereas I—’

‘Whereas you are the best among us, Ezekiel,’ Danatheum interrupted. ‘Though ours is a Chapter that values its secrets, it is a truth universally acknowledged that you are the most powerful psyker to have worn Dark Angels armour since the time of the Lion.’

‘Grand Master, you flatter me.’

‘No, I do not, Ezekiel. I am merely Grand Master of the Librarius by default. When I ascended from the Scout Company to the rank of Epistolary, there were close to thirty Librarians among the Chapter’s numbers, and now there are barely ten.’

Two more Lychguard overwhelmed their Dark Angels attackers and charged Danatheum, swords raised. Both blades elicited a shower of sparks as they connected with his hastily erected shield, which he dropped as swiftly as it was raised, simultaneously shooting one necron in the face

at point-blank range and impaling the other on the tip of Traitor's Bane.

'I can raise an aetheric shield or conjure fire in the palm of my hands as well as any other brother who wears the blue armour of the Librarius.' Another tall golden figure rushed him, but he met the same fate as the previous assailants. 'But that is the limit of my powers. The fact of the matter is I only ascended to the mantle of Grand Master of the Librarius because I outlived all of my contemporaries.'

'You do yourself a disservice,' Ezekiel said.

'Do I? How are we having this conversation right now, Ezekiel?'

'I am communicating with you via a telepathic projection of my physical form.'

'Exactly. *You* are projecting, not I.'

'But you are capable of the same feat, Grand Master,' Ezekiel said, his inflection rising at the end of the sentence, almost as if he were posing a question. 'It was you who taught me this skill.'

'Yes, Ezekiel. I have psychically projected myself from one level of the Rock to another, or from my position on the battlefield to yours,' Danatheum said, chuckling softly. 'Tell me, where are you right now?'

Ezekiel sighed, knowing that Danatheum had entirely scuppered his argument.

'I am in the Astropathic Chamber on board the *Sword of Caliban*.'

'And what is the *Sword of Caliban*'s position?'

'In Segmentum Pacificus, close to the border with Solar.'

'You see? You are two segmentums away and your psychic projection is the exact duplicate of your physical form.' Danatheum shook his head.

'Even the latest recruit to our ranks outstrips me in terms of raw power.'

'Turmiel? The boy shows promise but he is lacking in control and finesse.'

'The things you taught him during your year convalescing on the Rock would have taken me a decade to drill into him, if I was capable of them at all. That is why I sent him with you. By the time you return to the fold of the Chapter that boy will be second only to you in terms of psychic ability, mark my words.'

'But none of that means you are not worthy to sit at the head of the Librarius.'

'I may carry this sword, I may be the custodian of the Book and Holder of

the Keys, but I am only keeping them safe until the time comes for you to assume the mantle of guardian.'

'That will not be any time soon,' Ezekiel said. 'You'll outlive us all.'

Another sound joined the noise of battle, and the subterranean gloom began to lift as intense light spilled from an ornate tomb in the centre of the chamber. A heavy golden lid slowly slid aside as the occupant started to rouse from its slumber.

'Looks like it's time to take my leave,' Ezekiel said.

Danatheum shifted his gaze from the sarcophagus to look the vision of Ezekiel square in the eyes.

'Swear to me that I made the right decision, Ezekiel. What happened to you on Korsh was enough to change any man, even one blessed with the twin boons of the Lion's genetic legacy and the gift of the warp.'

Ezekiel blinked. 'I swear to you, Grand Master. I am the same now as I was before my encounter with the daemon.'

Danatheum looked the psychic projection up and down, appraising him. 'Good enough for me,' he said eventually. 'The Lion be with you, Ezekiel.' He raised his blade, ready to face and exterminate whatever rose from the tomb.

'And you, Grand Master,' Ezekiel said, exorcising his own psychic ghost.

'Why did you lie to Grand Master Danatheum?'

Ezekiel opened his eyes with a start. He had not sensed Turmiel enter the chamber.

'How long have you been in here?' Ezekiel said. His robes were soaked through with sweat, which dripped to the cold floor as he rose to his feet and turned to face the Lexicanium.

'Long enough to hear you tell the Chief Librarian that your battle with the daemon has left you unchanged.' Turmiel's expression was blank. Though he was looking directly at Ezekiel, he appeared to be staring at some unspecified point in the distance.

'That was no lie,' Ezekiel lied.

'Really?' Turmiel's voice was as emotionless as his hooded face. 'Then use your powers of foresight to tell me what I'm going to say next.'

Faster than the Lexicanium could react, Ezekiel lunged forwards, his forearm at Turmiel's throat, pushing him back against the hoar frost-rimed

wall of the chamber. The young psyker didn't even flinch.

'How long have you known, damn you?' Spittle coated Ezekiel's lips.

'Since the Rock. I realised that while you had been training me, you had also been relying on me to provide you with divinations. The information you provided Lord Azrael regarding the awakening of Phaeron Sylphek came directly from me, as did your briefing to Chaplain Asmodai about Black Legion movements in the region of the Ghoul Stars.' Ezekiel's arm remained locked across Turmiel's throat. 'I mean you no ill will or malice by telling you this, brother. I may not have been a Dark Angel for long, but I too recognise the value of secrets.'

Ezekiel's hold relaxed. Lacking as he was in his powers of foresight he could still tell when he was being lied to, and Turmiel was speaking the truth. 'My ability to perform my role is undiminished. It is only my powers of divination that are impaired. All of my other psychic faculties are functioning perfectly.'

'With the greatest of respect, brother, the Chapter relies upon you to sift through the firmament of time and read those possible futures that burn brightest. Without the ability to do that I believe your role is very much diminished.'

Ezekiel pushed hard with his forearm, lifting Turmiel from the floor. The Lexicanium remained unperturbed. 'Is that what this is? Blind ambition? You see an opening for the pupil to assume the master's role?'

'On the contrary. I see an opportunity to help repay you for the guidance and tutelage you have given me this past year. I have nothing but gratitude and respect for you, Brother Ezekiel. Let me help you while your powers are recovering.'

Turmiel was still speaking the truth, of that Ezekiel was sure. The boy did not have a malevolent or manipulative bone in his body; there was no hidden agenda here. Ezekiel moved his arm away. Turmiel slid down the wall, his armoured feet hitting the floor with a metallic thud.

'Forgive me, brother. I took leave of my senses momentarily. I harbour no malice towards you,' Ezekiel said, turning away.

'There is nothing to forgive. You are bound to feel... emotional. Losing one aspect of our psychic mastery is akin to one of our non-warp-gifted brothers losing a limb. The difference being, our powers will gradually return whereas limbs do not regrow.'

‘I’m not certain that my power of foresight will return,’ Ezekiel sighed. ‘There’s nothing there, not even a sliver of ability. My physical wounds may have healed but the gash in my psyche is still as fresh as the day it was gouged. When the daemon entered my mind it did not leave empty-handed.’

‘What was that like?’ Turmiel asked. For the first time since he had met him, Ezekiel could hear emotion creeping into the Epistolary’s voice. If he hadn’t known better he could have sworn it was fear. ‘To have another entity abroad in your mind, every aspect of your psyche exposed and opened up for exploitation...’

Ezekiel closed his eyes. ‘Please, brother...’

‘My apologies. I realise it must be difficult for you,’ Turmiel said. ‘I shall leave you in peace.’ He headed towards the chamber entrance.

‘Why did you come here, brother?’ Ezekiel asked just as Turmiel had reached the threshold. The question was as figurative as it was literal.

Turmiel stopped and turned back to face Ezekiel. ‘While you were in communion with Grand Master Danatheum I performed several rituals of divination, each one showing me the same vision of the future. That is why I came here, to tell you of the future.’

‘And what happens in the future, Turmiel?’

‘You die, Brother Ezekiel.’

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