




WARHAMMER
40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVELLA

SANCTUS

DARIUS HINKS



A NOVELLA FROM ARCHITECT OF FATE

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

SANCTUS

DARIUS HINKS



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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 Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-

present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

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



I am betrayed, thinks Sergeant Halser. *Betrayed*.

‘Comus is down!’ howls Brother Volter over the vox. ‘Dead, maybe... I-I can’t be sure. They’ve taken the infirmary. I’m pulling back. What are your orders? Sergeant?’ His voice is broken, his words half-buried beneath the sound of artillery. ‘Are you there? Sergeant Halser?’

Halser keeps his gun pressed to the prophet’s head and gives no reply. The pilgrims scream at him from the shadows, but he keeps his gaze fixed on a pair of grotesque, fathomless eyes.

The prophet stares back.

Halser places his finger on the trigger.

‘I can save both of us,’ says the prophet. His head lolls inside his bowl-shaped helmet, suspended by a pale, thin neck and a gloop of viscous liquid. The solution distorts his voice, but he tries to contort his vowels into something more human, enunciating each word carefully, as though speaking to a child. He points a long, webbed finger at the man in the doorway. ‘They’ve lied to you. They have murdered us both. They knew *exactly* what would happen. They have *always* known.’

Halser follows his gaze and sees to his horror that Gideon Pylcrafte is laughing. No mouth is visible beneath his black hood, just a quivering mass of cables, but his amusement is clear. Halser’s resolve evaporates. His hand falters. If Pylcrafte saw this coming, the whole mission was a lie. Halser tries to marshal his thoughts. He tries to pray, but the sound of Brother Volter’s pain knifes into him, merged with the wailing of the pilgrims. The artillery grows louder until it seems the whole valley is groaning. The noise is unbearable and too loud to be just heavy guns. As the blasts ring around his head, Halser is forced to accept the truth.

The orbital bombardment *has* already begun.

Without Comus’s protection, his mind edges quickly towards collapse. The

temporal distortion has reached its zenith and the pilgrims' voices claw at his thoughts like blades across metal. He cannot be sure what is now and what was then. Simultaneously, he is leading the squad through the catacombs, slaughtering the pilgrims at the city gates and reaching the inner temple, but he knows that has already been. He stares deeper into the prophet's misshapen eyes, trying to anchor himself.

'Comus is down!' howls Brother Volter over the vox. 'Dead, maybe... I—I can't be sure. They have taken the infirmary. I'm pulling back. What are your orders? Sergeant?'

Halser curses and looks back at the doorway. Time is collapsing. He has heard those words before, but how many times?

'I will *not* let you live,' he snaps, turning back to the prophet. The metallic ring of his amplified voice booms around the chamber. 'You're an abomination.'

The prophet's bloated skull drifts to one side and splits open in a grin. 'You have a ship and I have vision. The clouds are no barrier to me.' He waves at Pylcrafte. 'He's wronged us both. Why should we accept our fate? We are the elect few. We have great work ahead of us. Great deeds.'

Halser shakes his head, but there is doubt kindling in his eyes. To shoot the prophet means death. Worse than that, it means failure. But what is the alternative? After everything he has seen, how could he let such a man live?

The prophet brushes his elongated fingers against Halser's power armour. They trace around a filigreed skull and he narrows his eyes. 'Why did you come to Madrepore, *Relictor*?'

The chamber lurches and the ground shifts. The enemy fire is closing in. Centuries-old marble tumbles from the vaulted ceiling. Ten-metre eagles splinter and crack, covering the floor with vast, broken wings.

'Behold, the immutable will of the Emperor!' cries Pylcrafte from the doorway, raising his voice over the cacophony. 'You're a proud fool, Sergeant Halser. This is all on your head. This is the price you pay for all your lowly, creeping misbelief and your repeated use of xenos—'

Halser silences him with a shot to the head. The blast echoes around the chamber and Pylcrafte crumples in a plume of blood. The cables in his hood twitch for a few seconds longer, then he lies still.

Halser turns away and presses his bolt pistol back against the prophet's helmet. 'You're a mutant.'

'And what are you, *Relictor*?' The prophet's glass helmet is now splattered with Pylcrafte's blood but his voice remains defiant. He waves at the network of

passageways that lead off from his throne room. ‘There are weapons here. Weapons we could *use*.’ His voice grows softer. ‘They lied to you, Relictor. All of them. Your fidelity is misplaced, don’t you see?’

Halser grimaces as the agonised chorus grows louder: Brother Volter’s desperate requests for orders, the chanting of the pilgrims, the groaning of the earth, the pounding of the guns. But worse than the noise is the doubt. How could Mortmain have tricked him? As the question torments Halser, the doubt turns to rage. Even his oldest friend does not believe in him, does not believe in his Chapter. He and his men have been sent to their deaths. Perhaps the braver act would be to listen to the prophet? ‘I will prove you wrong, Mortmain,’ he spits. ‘I will make you *pay*.’

As his fury grows, the *déjà vu* becomes unbearable. The prophet’s words loop around the chamber, growing louder with each repetition. Halser’s indecision grows and lights blossom in his head, merging with the crystals in the walls and the glyphs rolling across his visor. He sees a corona of sunlight around Ilissus, shimmering like spun gold as he breaks orbit and drops down into the storm.



Chapter One

‘Ilissus IV. Shrine World.’ Pylcrafte speaks in the awed tones of a supplicant. ‘Until the enemy seized control, this was one of the holiest sites in the galaxy. Before the dark days of the Heresy, the Emperor Himself trod its hallowed earth.’

As they fall from the heavens, the curvature of the planet vanishes, obscured by a tormented mass of thunderheads and tornadoes. The gunship begins to rattle and shake, but Sergeant Halser is distracted by the strangeness of the storms: strands of gilded vapour, rising from bottomless valleys of cloud. The whole planet is shrouded. It looks like a ghost.

‘And the clouds?’ he asks.

Pylcrafte lowers his voice. ‘A sign of the infernal transgressions that have doomed Ilissus, a badge of its utter corruption. This is the witchcraft Inquisitor Mortmain spoke of. The tempest is not natural, Sergeant Halser. It is the most profane manifestation of Chaos. The clouds appeared after the arrival of the Black Legion, three centuries ago, and they *bleed* heresy. They are sentient. *Malevolent*. A metamorphic likeness of nature. A cheap glamour, constructed to hide the face of the enemy. And their reach is growing longer.’

Halser is a bull-necked lump of rage. His slab-like features are flushed and trembling and his lips are curled back in a sneer. The glare he turns on Brother-Librarian Comus would shrivel a normal man.

Comus scowls back, undaunted, his eyes full of the same bitter fury.

‘What do you sense?’ growls Halser.

Comus shrugs his broad, armoured shoulders and looks down at something in the palm of his right hand. ‘Sorcery, yes, the libellus is clear on that, but in the clouds...?’ His scowl deepens as he turns towards Pylcrafte. ‘I’m sure Inquisitor Mortmain’s servant is correct.’

The gunship lurches again as the golden storm envelops its hull. Servitors scurry back and forth trying to silence alarms and steady flickering lights.

Halser punches the comms panel as though imagining it is someone's face. 'Thunderhawk Five, this is Thunderhawk Four. Brother Silvius, state your position.'

There is a burst of static, followed by a staccato, inhuman voice. '... Five... Navigation difficult... Unsure of altitude... Extreme turbulence...' There is another burst of static, followed by: 'Sergeant, I'm not sure if we can hold our—'

The connection dies, leaving a thin screech of feedback in its wake. Halser silences the machine and glares at it for a few seconds. Then he looks over at Pylcrafte. The turbulence has thrown him into his seat and his hood has fallen from his tonsured head, revealing the oily knot of cables where his face should be. Each coiled flex ends in a glistening, brass-rimmed lens, and as he turns towards Halser they focus on him with a series of whirring clicks.

'Inquisitor Mortmain warned that landing would be difficult,' says the inquisitor's acolyte, 'but as long as your men follow his counsel exactly, they will only be on the surface briefly. The planet is riddled with tunnels. They were wrought thousands of years ago by mendicants, before they yielded to the malign dominion of the Inferior Powers. The corruption in the air is clearly of no concern to heretics, but to us it could mean death, or even worse: transmutation. We must spend as little time in the open as possible.'

'Mortmain mentioned the priests. He said they were connected to the original invasion.'

Pylcrafte nods. 'They were confounded by the Ruinous Powers, and then they were butchered by the Black Legion.' His voice trembles slightly. 'And, to the eternal shame of the Ecclesiarchy, they brought it all on themselves. A group of senior priests were responsible for Ilissus. Who else could watch over a world where the Emperor once walked? But their deceit brought ignominy on their blessed brotherhood. The priests left in charge of the infamous Zeuxis Scriptorium became enamoured of certain artefacts, certain *magic* charms enshrined during the days of the Great Crusade.' Pylcrafte pulls his hood back into place and withdraws his optical cables. He looks like a snail, retreating into its shell. 'It's a tale as old as the Imperium. What began as innocent research ended in loathsome idolatry. The doomed priests summoned the most vile, unspeakable malefactors into their temples. They handed over their souls to the Black Legion as a gift. It would seem that whatever they found in the scriptorium was too much for their simple faith to overcome. They were the

architects of their own miserable fate.’

Comus clenches his fists and mutters to the floor. ‘And here we are, following in their footsteps.’

The spasms in Halser’s face grow more noticeable as he struggles to keep his voice low. ‘Mortmain sent us. Why would he do that if he thought we were insufficient for the task?’

Pylcrafte raises a slender, ivory cane and waves it at the distant fleet. ‘I would remind you, Sergeant Halser, that my master did not *send* you anywhere. He merely pointed out the tragedy of losing such an ancient site in the impending Exterminatus.’

‘He said more than that.’

The inquisitor’s acolyte shrugs. ‘He gave you no orders, Sergeant Halser. He learned of your esoteric interests and, by the providence of our Most Venerable Emperor, he was able to offer you a chance for elucidation – an opportunity to explore the scriptoria before they are destroyed. You are here of your own volition.’

Halser’s lips curl back further from his teeth into a terrifying smile. ‘Don’t worry. I learned long ago not to expect any official endorsements.’

The gunship banks hard and Pylcrafte’s cane slips from his grip, clattering harmlessly off Comus’s armour and bouncing into a corner. As the gunship plunges through the clouds, the lights fail for a few seconds. In the darkness Halser sees Pylcrafte’s cluster of eyes, watching him closely from within his hood. He remembers something odd that Comus said about him and leans forwards with a question. Then the sound of the turbulence becomes deafening and he leans back.

The question is forgotten.

‘We need to find shelter!’ yells Pylcrafte. He is cowering behind the armoured bulk of Halser with his cane wedged in the dust, struggling to stay on his feet.

Comus and the rest of the squad are spread out around the downed gunship with their bolters trained on the storm, as motionless as statues. Their pewter-coloured armour matches the smoke pouring from the ship’s damaged hull; if not for the white skulls painted on their pauldrons they would be nearly invisible.

Halser ignores Pylcrafte, fascinated by the view. Even his enhanced vision cannot pierce the clouds, but as they whirl and heave around him, he catches glimpses of Ilissus’s strange landscape: soaring limbs of rock, wrenched from the earth by forces he can only imagine, creating a bewildering web of ruddy

stone towers, almost indistinguishable from the storm. The rock is so contorted it resembles a great coral reef, dragged from beneath the ground. As the clouds rush between the columns they howl, and it seems to Halser as though they are trying to speak. He even holds his breath for a second, trying to catch a meaning in the sound; then he gives a short bark of laughter, amused by his own ridiculousness.

Remembering the pain in his leg, he looks down at the jagged hole in his armour. The Larraman cells have already done their work – the wound scabbed over in seconds – but he will be left with yet another ugly scar. He mutters a prayer of thanks. Every jagged line only serves to remind him of his proud burden. A lesser man would not have survived such a disastrous landing.

He stoops to wipe the blood from his damaged armour then turns to the others. They are still scanning the horizon for signs of attack. A few of them have injuries of their own but, to a man, they are straight-backed and alert. He feels a swell of pride. Even now, after all the lies and slander, they are unbroken: as determined as he is to prove their worth – even if only to themselves.

‘Which way to the scriptoria?’ he calls, ignoring the cowled figure standing next to him.

Pylcrafte flinches at the sergeant’s words. The crash has left him badly shaken. His floor-length robes are torn, and as he looks back at the Librarian his head twitches with fear.

Comus nods in reply and unclasps a book from his power armour. It is small, leather-bound, sealed with gold clasps and foiled with symbols that are far too bizarre to be of human design. It could be mistaken for a harmless piece of arcana, but Halser knows the truth. He knows what he is asking of his old friend.

Comus unlocks the clasps and flips open the cover, frowning with concentration as he handles the tiny book. There are no pages inside, just a hinged, steel case covered with dials, runes and a glass screen. The Librarian inserts a cable into a socket on the side of the device, closes his eyes and winces in pain. Then he begins to mouth words that are lost to the wind.

As he watches Comus praying, Pylcrafte’s terrified expression becomes a sneer of disgust. ‘How can you allow him to handle such a *talisman*?’ he asks, looking up at the sergeant.

Halser gives no answer, but he knows the question is a fair one.

‘According to the libellus, the Zeuxis Scriptorium was five kilometres north of this spot.’ Comus’s voice is taut with pain. ‘If I understand the xenos text correctly, the storm has not thrown us too far off target.’

‘Five kilometres away?’ cries Pylcrafte, looking afraid again. ‘Then we must move fast. We’ve already spent too long above ground. I told you – the only safe way to cross this planet is underground. We must find a tunnel before we do anything else.’

Halser nods. ‘Once we’ve located Brother Silvius’s ship.’

Pylcrafte reels as though slapped. His voice shrieks even higher. ‘Your battle-brothers could be scattered across the continent. They could all be dead. You’ve heard no word from them.’ He jabs his cane into the dusty ground. ‘We need to find cover *now*.’

Rage is ever-present in Sergeant Halser’s eyes, but for a moment it seems on the verge of boiling over into violence. His huge jaw tightens and his voice fills with disbelief. ‘Are you *ordering* me?’

A little colour creeps into Pylcrafte’s pallid face. ‘Of course not, but you’ve tried to contact your men and there’s no response.’ He lowers his nest of eyes. ‘You may have to consider that they have fallen. Why would they ignore your signal?’

Halser thumps the lifeless auspex at his belt. ‘Since that storm spat us out, we *have* no signal.’ He looks again at the towering clouds. ‘Nothing. We are alone.’ He lifts his helmet and snaps it into place. When he speaks again, his voice is an inhuman growl. ‘But I will not abandon my men.’

Pylcrafte cringes pitifully and clutches his cane to his chest. ‘Of course not, Sergeant Halser. But you must understand, if we don’t head below the surface now, we might encounter the enemy.’

Halser studies him through the featureless visor of his helmet. Then he raises his bolt pistol and clangs it against the battered grey ceramite of his chest armour. ‘I hope so, Pylcrafte, I really do.’



Chapter Two

Inquisitor Mortmain sits quietly in the cathedral, head bowed and weary, relishing the solitude. Even here, deep within the bewildering network of cloisters and buttressed towers he cannot fully escape the sounds of the ship: the rumble of engines, the grinding of weapons batteries and the droning hum of power circuits; but it is the closest thing the *Domitus* has to a haven. Vast, lancet windows watch over him, flooding the cathedral with coloured light and painting his face a lurid green. Mortmain could never be considered handsome. His features are as angular and harsh as the statues that line the nave, but there is a fierceness to his blunt, crooked nose; a sense of purpose beneath his low, heavy brow, that would mark him out in a crowded room, even without the badge of office that hangs around his neck.

As he studies the windows Mortmain finds it hard to meet his master's eye. Despite the horrors the ship has endured the Emperor's gaze has not faded. The stained glass was crafted on Terra, countless centuries ago, but the scale of the artist's vision is undimmed: the Emperor glares down resplendent from the backlit glass, still sure of His purpose, still blazing with unshakeable faith.

The inquisitor grimaces and steers his thoughts beyond the glass, beyond the cathedral, beyond even the rest of the *Domitus*. He pictures Fleet Sanctus, trailing after him through the void. The Emperor's might, turned aside from its purpose, redirected at his command. Mortmain pulls his thick leather cloak a little tighter, suddenly conscious of the cold. His shoulders slump as he considers the weight of his choices. In his left hand he grips a vellum scroll, beautifully illuminated, clasped with silver and covered with wax purity seals. It bears the mark of governors, company commanders, captains and bishops: everyone who could possibly question his decision. The Concordat of Zeuxis they named it, in recognition of Ilissus' famed scriptorium, but Mortmain is under no illusions: it

is a death warrant. The fate of an entire world is in his hands. Maybe more. He draws a deep breath. Compared to such weighty matters, what concern is a friendship? Is he risking too much?

A polite cough interrupts his thoughts. He looks up and sees a hooded priest watching him from the far end of the nave.

‘Is the Novator here?’ Mortmain has not spoken for several hours and his voice is a hesitant croak, but the acoustics of the cathedral are such that his words are amplified, echoing around the vaulted ceilings and sculpted columns.

The distant figure nods. ‘Should I show him in, Inquisitor Mortmain?’

Mortmain clears his throat and rises to his feet, flinging back his floor-length cloak. There is a flash of silver as the light plays across his etched breastplate. The intricate designs in the metal are worked around a central device: the letter I, crossed with three bars and studded with a single, blood-red stone.

Mortmain has a black, serrated billhook tucked into his belt and as he stands he grips the hilt in his right hand, soothed by the feel of its cool, pitted ebony against his skin.

He nods, and when he speaks again the doubt has gone from his voice. ‘Bring him to me.’

The priest bows and shuffles back into the shadows.

After a few minutes a man approaches. He is stooped low to the floor and moving backwards in a series of strange, lurching hops. Mortmain realises that he is dusting the floor, furiously wiping the stones to save the shoes of his master.

This must be van Tol, thinks Mortmain as another man appears. The second man walks upright, with a confident stride and his shoulders thrown back. He is immaculately dressed in a starched military uniform. Every centimetre of his tall, elegant frame is braided and adorned, and there is an ornate, gilt-handled sabre at his side. As he catches sight of Mortmain, his waxed moustache quivers over a glib smirk. ‘Inquisitor,’ he drawls. ‘Have I interrupted your prayers? You must forgive me.’ His face is the complete antithesis of Mortmain’s, with a small, receding chin, creamy, flawless complexion and features so delicate they are almost pretty.

Mortmain gives a stiff bow and steps away from the altar, filling the cathedral with noise as his iron-shod boots clang across the flagstones. ‘Not at all, baron. I have been looking forward to meeting you again.’ As he approaches his guest, the inquisitor notices other men waiting in the shadows: the baron has brought his guards. This is no social call, he thinks, gripping the billhook a little

tighter.

Baron van Tol holds out a limp, white-gloved hand. It is unclear whether he expects it to be shaken or kissed.

Mortmain grasps it firmly in his own. 'Your chambers are sufficient, I hope?'

The baron continues to smirk. 'Sufficient, yes.' The words merge into one another, as though he can barely find the energy to separate vowels from consonants. He is unusually tall and studies Inquisitor Mortmain down the length of a long, aquiline nose, his eyes half-lidded and full of disdain, like those of a basking lizard waiting idly to be fed. 'Not a single dissenter,' he says.

Mortmain frowns, confused.

The baron nods at the scroll in Mortmain's hand. 'The concordat.' There is an unmistakable note of mockery in his voice. 'Your word is law, Inquisitor Mortmain. Your doubts were unfounded. There are few, even here, who would question the will of the Imperial Inquisition.'

Mortmain shrugs, ignoring the baron's sneering tone. 'I claim no credit. We are all just vessels for the Emperor's will. And, besides, your evidence was persuasive. What hope do we have of containing anything with corruption left unchecked at our backs?'

'*Exactly.*'

The two men stand in silence for a few seconds, still clutching each other's hands. Finally, Mortmain withdraws his grip and waves to one of the pews.

'Tell me,' says the inquisitor, once they are seated, 'what has brought you to the *Domitus*? The concordat is signed. I thought you would be eager to return home. I understand that being in such close proximity to the Eye of Terror is particularly unpleasant for someone with your talents.' At the word 'talents' he gazes briefly at the baron's forehead. Van Tol is wearing a peaked cap, pulled low, and there is no sign of anything strange; beyond a vaguely translucent quality to his skin, he might be a normal man.

The baron shrugs. 'I will return to Terra as soon as possible, of course, but I...' He hesitates, as though doubting the inquisitor's ability to understand. 'I have complete confidence in your abilities, Inquisitor Mortmain. Let me make that clear. I have nothing but respect for men who drag themselves up from the...' a look of distaste crosses his face, '*lower* orders of society. I'm sure that you're a very *competent* individual.' He seems unwilling to meet Mortmain's gaze. 'But I will not be able to rest until this situation has been resolved.'

Mortmain raises his eyebrows and leans back in the pew. 'Ilissus will be destroyed, Baron van Tol.'

‘Of course it will, Inquisitor Mortmain, I have no doubt of that. No doubt at all.’ The baron laughs. It is a shrill, mirthless sound and his eyes remain fixed on the floor. ‘But it would set an old man’s heart at ease to witness the deed first-hand.’

Mortmain opens his mouth to reply, but before he can speak one of the baron’s attendants steps out of the shadows. He is a double of the baron, with the same feminine features and languid bearing. The only difference is a little less grey in his moustache and a few less medals on his uniform.

‘Why is there no action?’ demands the younger noble, his face flushed with emotion. ‘Every minute sees the contagion spreading. While we—’

‘Silence, my dear Palchus!’ The baron’s voice is soft, but full of venom. ‘How dare you interrupt? Stand down.’

The young man’s eyes glitter with rage, but he does as ordered and steps back into the darkness.

The baron turns back to Mortmain, clearly embarrassed. ‘You must forgive my son’s appalling manners. We are all very concerned about the situation.’ He shifts awkwardly in the pew. ‘In his clumsy way, though, he has asked the question that is on my own mind: when exactly will the bombardment begin? Your ships are in place, are they not?’

Mortmain studies the baron in silence for a few seconds, struggling to keep his expression neutral. ‘Ilissus will be destroyed.’ He chooses his words carefully. ‘The nobles of House van Tol have played an important part in bringing this situation to light, but the matter is now in the hands of the Inquisition.’

The baron briefly meets the inquisitor’s gaze, his eyes still hooded with mirth. ‘Of course. I merely came to offer my assistance. You must understand...’ The baron’s words trail off as he notices how closely Mortmain is studying him. The smirk finally vanishes, as abruptly as a light being extinguished. ‘Has the defence of Ilissus *definitely* been abandoned?’

Mortmain stares at van Tol, unused to having his actions questioned.

‘I just wondered,’ continues the baron, ‘about the two gunships that launched a few hours ago.’

Mortmain continues to stare.

The baron waits for an answer that never comes. Eventually he rises to his feet, uncomfortable under Mortmain’s intense gaze. ‘I sense I’ve annoyed you Inquisitor Mortmain, and that was not my intention.’ He steps back with a slight bow. The smirk returns. ‘I will be in my chambers if you need anything.’

Mortmain narrows his eyes, but says nothing as he watches the baron saunter down the nave, whispering to his lackeys as they vanish into the long shadows. Once their footfalls have faded, the inquisitor looks up into the benevolent gaze of the Emperor. 'They're hiding something,' he mutters, keeping his eyes fixed on the glass.

A voice replies from the darkness. The words are moist and distorted, as though spoken through a bundle of wet rags. The language is impenetrable and revolting.

Mortmain nods in agreement and purses his lips. 'Exterminatus can wait a little longer. I will not consign millions to their deaths without knowing *every* relevant fact.'

Another stream of gurgled vowels answers him.

Mortmain massages his shaven head and slips back into silent reverie. 'The young one,' he says finally, 'the baron's son. I think the Novator called him Palchus. He is clearly unstable. I'm sure we could use that to our advantage. The *Domitus* is a large ship, after all. I imagine he might easily get lost.'

There is a rumble of laughter, accompanied by the sound of chains, scraping across stone.

Mortmain's voice is full of distaste. 'Be gentle, Cerebalus. I will soon have the death of a world on my conscience. Do not add to my burden.'



Chapter Three

Even through the howling wind, the sound of bolter fire is unmistakable as Brother Thymus spins backwards through the storm, a blackened hole in his breastplate.

‘Down,’ snaps Sergeant Halser over the vox, and the Relictors vanish from sight.

Pylcrafte moans pitifully as he cowers between the sergeant and Brother-Librarian Comus. ‘We must be steadfast,’ he whimpers, trembling violently. ‘The dominion of the idolaters is—’

Comus clamps a hand over his mouth and shoves him unceremoniously to the ground.

Their cover is a narrow gully, no more than four metres wide.

‘The next ridge,’ mutters Comus.

Halser nods and looks back through the swirling dust clouds. Brother Thymus is lying on his side, convulsing. Blood and hydraulic fluid is spraying from his punctured chest armour and he seems unable to rise. He has fallen above the gully and is completely exposed, but it is useless to think of saving him. The sound of his laboured breathing is terrible to hear. He will not survive.

The sergeant is so furious that for a few seconds he cannot speak. How could he be so foolish as to lead his men into an ambush? Brother Thymus has served at his side in countless engagements. Inside Halser’s helmet, his cheeks flush purple with rage and he spits a prayer. ‘Everything that happens is the Emperor’s will.’ The words bring him no solace. He shakes his head and raises his hand, preparing to give an order.

Before he can speak, two objects clatter across the rocks.

The Space Marines react instantly, recognising the frag grenades before they even settle, but it is no use: the grenades are primed to detonate on impact.

The gully fills with sound and light.

Halser lands heavily on his back behind a narrow limb of rock, his ears ringing from the blast. Great plumes of dust mingle with the storm as he strains to see the others. Bulky, grey shadows dash through the smoke but he cannot see who, if anyone, has fallen. He repeats his prayer, sounding even less convinced. 'Everything that happens is the Emperor's will.'

The limb of rock explodes as a round of bolter fire slams into it. The sergeant rolls clear, dropping into another gully and glimpsing muzzle flare above a distant crest of rock. He marks the position.

The smoke dances away in the storm and Halser spots Brother-Librarian Comus, crouching a few metres away. He looks uninjured, but he is clutching the ornate mantle that surrounds his gorget, grimacing in pain. The cables that connect the metal hood to his skull are pulsing with inner fire.

Halser catches his eye, nods to the location of the enemy and mimes a throwing movement; then he taps his bolt pistol and waves it down the gully.

Comus nods in reply, but the grimace remains on his face and as he unclips a grenade from his belt he clutches his head with his other hand, furiously massaging his temples.

There is another deafening blast as Comus's grenade finds its mark.

At the same moment, Sergeant Halser emerges from the far end of the gully, sprinting towards the crest of rock. As he knifes through the clouds, a black-armoured figure rises and tumbles away from him, thrown back by the grenade blast.

Halser fires as he runs, unloading several rounds into the reeling figure and drawing his chainsword. As he vaults over the lip of rock, the sergeant's blade is already rattling and spitting oil.

The enemy tries to return fire, but before he can level his pistol at Halser, the sergeant's chainsword slices through his forearm in a shower of sparks, blood and splintered bone.

As his opponent staggers back, clutching countless wounds, Halser gets a clear look at him.

The Traitor Marine is clad in ancient, black armour, twisted and sculpted into a baroque mess of curves and spikes, and trimmed with golden, razor-sharp edges. The mouth grille of his helmet has been wrenched into a bestial leer and his breastplate is emblazoned with a pus-yellow eye.

The sergeant howls. The sound could either be rage or ecstasy, it is impossible to tell. He raises his chainsword to strike again.

The Traitor Marine is too fast. He blocks Halser's chainsword with his own and the air fills with sparks and the sound of grinding gears.

Halser lifts his bolt pistol but, before he can fire, pain explodes in his side. He is lifted from his feet, spun around and sent crashing to the ground. Before landing he glimpses a second Traitor Marine, looming out of the storm and lifting his bolter for another shot.

Halser rolls to one side as the ground explodes around him.

Then there is a screech of grinding metal and the gunfire stops.

He rises from the ground and sees the second Traitor Marine drop his bolter and clutch his chest, howling in pain. The blade of a sword has emerged from his chest armour and is slicing up towards his throat. The sword shimmers with unnatural light as it rips the enemy warrior in two, emitting a final, blinding pulse as it wrenches free in a fountain of blood and sparks.

Brother-Librarian Comus steps around his victim as he topples, lifeless, to the ground. His force sword is still blazing with psychic energy as he turns towards the other Traitor Marine but, before he can strike, he clutches his head in agony and stumbles, the tip of his sword clattering uselessly against the rocks.

The remaining Traitor Marine turns his gun on the Librarian but the left side of his helmet evaporates before he can pull the trigger, leaving a smouldering pulp of ruptured armour and charred brains.

He drops to the floor with a whistling gurgle.

Sergeant Halser steps over him and fires a second shot into his mouth grille. Then another. He keeps firing until the traitor's head is nothing but a bloody stain on the rock. Then he crouches low and spins around, peering down the barrel of his gun. The rattle of bolter fire echoes around the valley, but the sound is distorted and muffled by the clouds, making it impossible to pinpoint anything.

'Squad Elicius,' he grunts into his vox-bead, 'state your condition.'

Voices crackle over the comm-net. The fighting has been brief. Only Brother Thymus has fallen.

Halser shakes his head, suspicious at the ease of their victory. 'Hold your positions. The enemy don't usually attack in such small numbers.' He turns to see that Comus has dropped to his knees and is still clutching his head.

He rushes to the Librarian's side. 'Are you wounded?'

As Comus looks up, his face is ashen and his eyes are blazing. 'Is the device sending me mad? Can't you hear it?'

Halser shakes his head in confusion. 'Hear what?'

‘The clouds,’ groans Comus, his voice filled with horror. ‘They’re talking to us.’



Chapter Four

Monks and servitors melt into the shadows, scattering like vermin before the approaching Navigator. A servo-skull drifts ahead of him, trailing smoke-shrouded censers and bearing a tall, guttering candle. As the light flickers across rows of gloomy alcoves, it picks out the *Domitus*'s cowering denizens. They peer suspiciously at the slender noble and mutter prayers into their hoods. Even the ship's most ill-omened wretches breathe a sigh of relief as Palchus van Tol passes them by.

At the end of a long, vaulted passageway stands his father, peering through a leaded viewport. It is hard to see anything through the metre-thick panes, clouded as they are by ash and cobwebs, but as Palchus approaches he can just make out the vague, spectral presence of Ilissus.

'They were Relictors,' he mutters.

'Who were?' asks the baron, turning towards him.

'The Adeptus Astartes sent down onto the planet. I spoke to some of the stevedores. Mortmain himself had sworn them to secrecy.' He grimaces. 'It was not easy to extract the truth.'

'Oh yes, I know who's down there.' Baron van Tol fixes his half-lidded eyes on his nephew. 'You're not the only one here with sight.' He raps his knuckles against the glass. 'What do you see now, though?'

Palchus looks out at the ghostly planet and shakes his head. 'Nothing. Nothing beyond the warp storms, that is. I've never seen such power.'

The baron sneers. 'It's a dirty, crude form of sorcery, but yes, it's certainly powerful.' He looks around, noting the hooded figures flitting through the shadows, and leans closer to his nephew, lowering his voice. 'If Mortmain doesn't act soon the corruption will spread.' He plucks an object from his braided ceremonial jacket and lifts it up into the candlelight. It is a tiny

hourglass, housed within a frame of intricately engraved finger bones.

Palchus grimaces at the sight of it. The sand has gathered in the centre, refusing to fall either way. He grabs his father's wrist, pulls the hourglass closer and shakes it, to no effect. 'What does it mean?'

The baron shrugs. 'Time is on the run, Palchus. The storm on Ilissus is spreading.' He lowers his voice even further. 'The concordat has only bought us a brief reprieve. If Ilissus isn't destroyed soon, the other Houses will smell a rat. They have a little more insight than these plebeians.' He looks back at the planet. 'They won't believe this rubbish about the Black Legion. They will see the storms for what they truly are. We will be ruined.'

'Then what do we do?' Palchus's voice is edged with panic. 'The inquisitor is obviously lying to us. Why would he send Space Marines onto a planet scheduled for Exterminatus?'

The baron shakes his head and puts the hourglass back into his pocket. 'The Relictors are scavengers. They're famed for it. They're vile magpies, always peering beneath stones that ought to be left unturned. Everyone knows they're just a step away from heresy, but Inquisitor Mortmain must have allowed them one last chance to explore the planet for some reason. Before—' He pauses and curls his lip with displeasure. 'Before the problems arose, Ilissus was famed for its scriptoria. One in particular is said to house documents and relics older than the Imperium itself.'

'The Zeuxis Scriptorium.'

The baron nods. 'The Zeuxis Scriptorium is *particularly* infamous. The priests in charge had similar interests to the Relictors, interests that most reputable people would consider heretical. It has been lost for centuries, but the Relictors have a knack of unearthing things.' He pulls back his shoulders and raises his chin. 'I must think. Meet me in my chambers in an hour.' As he ambles off down the passageway, another servo-skull drifts down from the rafters and trails after him, lighting the way. 'Do nothing,' he says, sneering at Palchus as he disappears around a corner.

Palchus drums his fingers against the viewport. What's Mortmain thinking? Why would he delay even a second when so much is at risk? Why would he ignore the concordat? Someone must know. He stands there for a few minutes, muttering to himself, until an idea hits him. It seems to arrive fully formed, as though the ship itself has answered his question. 'Of course,' he mutters. 'There are other Relictors on board. They must know what's going on.'

He strides over to an empty alcove. It is a shrine of some kind, but he pays no

attention to the hunched, winged statue crouched in the darkness, as he sits on a stone bench and closes his eyes. He places his fingers beneath the peak of his cap, resting them on a swelling in the middle of his forehead. Then he whispers an incantation under his breath and, after a few minutes, his breathing begins to quicken and beads of sweat appear on his face. Numb pain spreads from his forehead and he moans softly. Images tumble through his mind. He sees engines: vast, oil-black behemoths, thundering and belching far below him in the belly of the *Domitus*. Then he sees miles of featureless hab blocks, housing legions of crewmen and priests and whole regiments of Guardsmen. Many of the Guardsmen are wounded and as Palchus's mind touches theirs, he feels agony and fear. He moves on, holding his breath as he looks through flight decks, chapels, cloisters and hangars, searching desperately until he senses something quite different from the Guardsmen: a sliver of cool, hard arrogance. 'Yes,' he whispers. The minds of the Adeptus Astartes are unmistakable. He removes his fingers from his forehead, pulls his cap back into place and finally exhales. 'Just a few kilometres away.' To find his targets so easily seems a little odd, but Palchus is so anxious he does not pause to consider the odds of stumbling across the Relictors so quickly.

He rises and looks out into the passageway. The baron's light has faded from view. 'I'm sorry father,' he says, his voice trembling with emotion, 'I won't just sit around as our name is thrown to the dogs.' With that, he turns and hurries in the opposite direction, quickly disappearing into the endless maze of corridors.

After a few seconds the large, winged shape crouched in the shrine climbs down from the wall. As it steps out into the passage, the outline of the thing is hard to discern, but as it slips quietly after Palchus, one of the hooded onlookers is unfortunate enough to catch a brief glimpse. He stumbles back against the wall with a curse, left with an image of torn, ruptured flesh and battered, jagged iron. As the onlooker drops to his knees, pressing his palms over his eyes, he hears the rattle of chains, scraping into the distance.

After half an hour, Palchus notices that the passageways are growing narrower and less well-kept. There is no sign of any servitors and piles of waste lie uncleared in the corners. The air grows thick with the smell of engine oil and faeces, and the Navigator hides his face behind a silk, perfumed handkerchief. Are these really suitable quarters for Adeptus Astartes, he wonders? Then he remembers which Chapter he is looking for: the Relictors. Their fall from grace is almost laughable. An open sewer is the perfect place to house men with so

many accusations of heresy hanging over them.

Eventually, the ceiling falls so low that the servo-skull is unable to follow and Palchus curses, stumbling to a halt in the darkness. ‘What *is* this place?’ he mutters, pulling a small light from his jacket pocket. As the thin beam washes over the walls ahead, he sees the passageway is no longer made of stone: it is a jumble of corrugated iron, rusted heating vents and gurgling, hissing pipes.

‘Perhaps this isn’t right,’ he mutters, stooping and edging slowly forwards.

Then he hears a sound from behind him and turns around, levelling his light at the shadows. The darkness ripples and slides but he can see nothing clearly. A feeling of dread grips him.

Palchus draws his sword and considers turning back, but barely has the thought formed in his mind when the door behind rattles free of its supports and slams down onto the stone floor. The resultant *clang* causes the Navigator to flinch so violently that his light slips from his fingers and bounces away into the shadows, extinguishing itself as it goes.

Palchus curses as pitch dark descends. ‘Is anyone there?’ he calls, his words echoing weirdly through the narrow passageway.

There is no reply.

Palchus drops to his knees and reaches through the darkness. He is sure he can pinpoint where the light fell, but as his fingers brush over the cold stone, they find no trace of the metal cylinder.

‘Where is it?’ he hisses, with a rising sense of panic.

As the Navigator’s fingers stretch further, they brush against something soft and warm.

He yelps in horror, scrabbling back towards the wall.

Terror grips him as he climbs to his feet and backs away as fast as he can. The darkness is so complete that he is forced to feel his way along the cold, sticky metal of the walls, cursing under his breath as his fingers catch on jagged edges and broken screws.

Despite the pain he gradually picks up speed, gaining confidence as his eyes start to adjust to the dark. He realises that there is an opening up ahead and breaks into a sprint, holding his sword out ahead of him as he runs.

As Palchus nears the doorway, he glimpses movement up ahead: a hunched, glistening shape, too fast to make out clearly.

Seconds before he reaches the opening, the door clangs shut.

Palchus slams into it with a grunt. His sword buckles and twists painfully in his grip.

As he slides to the floor, holding his hands up in front of his face, he senses something in the darkness.

A shape is approaching.



Chapter Five

As the rest of squad Elicius clamber awkwardly over the rocks, Sergeant Halser pauses on an outcrop and waits for Brother-Librarian Comus to catch up. As he watches his old friend approaching he feels a painful mixture of anger and guilt. Comus's power armour is cloaked in dust and as he stumbles over the weird terrain his face remains locked in a grimace, but he still has the libellus clasped firmly in his grip. 'I had no choice,' growls Halser to himself. 'This is our last chance.'

He wipes his visor and scours the horizon for signs of the enemy. The sun has already slipped lower in the sky, trimming the clouds with bronze and making it even harder to see. Halser grabs the auspex from his belt but it is still dead. They have heard nothing from Brother Silvius since the crash. More worryingly, they have not been able to contact Fleet Sanctus or the *Domitus*. They are utterly alone. As his gaze falls back on the stooped figure of Comus, Halser keeps thinking the same thought. This is our last chance.

Comus is only a few metres away when Halser notices something odd. As the Librarian enters a narrow defile, he vanishes briefly from view, before re-emerging and giving the sergeant a wave of his sword. Sergeant Halser nods in reply, but then frowns. A bank of dust drifts between the two Space Marines and when it clears, Comus has vanished. Halser prepares to call out, but before he can, Comus reappears, climbing into view exactly as before. He even gives Halser the same wave, as though nothing has happened. Halser feels a chill of alarm. Something is wrong, but he is unable to say exactly what. Comus could have stumbled back into the defile, but there was something strange about the way he signalled. His second wave was identical to his first. Halser shakes his head and rises to greet the Librarian. *Déjà vu*, he thinks, but the sense of alarm stays with him as he helps Comus up the rocks to his side.

‘Are you fit for duty?’ he asks, hiding his concern behind a scowl. He realises that there are tears of blood welling in the Librarian’s eyes.

Comus nods, but is too short of breath to reply.

‘Is it the presence of the Traitor Marines?’ asks Halser. ‘Is that what’s causing you such pain?’

Comus frowns and shakes his head. ‘No,’ he manages to grunt after a few minutes. As he speaks, small flecks of blood glisten on his lips. He nods at the libellus. ‘It is the xenos device – and something else. There is something else here.’

Halser waves at the columns of rock and the rolling clouds. ‘This is the work of heretics, though, surely?’

Comus follows his gaze and looks up at the tormented sunset. ‘Something else,’ he repeats.

Halser realises that he has never seen his battle-brother in such pain. ‘Should you head back to the gunship, Comus? We don’t have time for passengers. Perhaps you could help the tech-priests? They seemed to think the repairs would take a while, but an extra pair of hands might speed things up.’ He hesitates. ‘Perhaps you could show me how to use the xenos device.’

Comus grips the sergeant’s arm. ‘No. I must continue. I’m shielding you from something.’ He waves at the clouds. ‘That’s why...’ His words trail off and he grimaces again. ‘The pain is not just from the libellus. It’s because I’m holding back the prayers.’

‘Prayers?’ Halser shakes his head in confusion. ‘Whose prayers?’

‘There are prayers on the wind. And they are filled with such power they would flay you to the bone if I let them.’

‘Power? You mean witchcraft?’

Comus closes his eyes and presses a hand against one of the dozens of purity seals that adorn his power armour. His fingers press deep into the lump of wax and crumpled parchment, and when he opens his eyes they are a little clearer. ‘No, not witchcraft. At least, not the sort you mean. I hear catechisms and the names of saints. I hear prayers that speak of obedience to the Immortal Emperor.’ He massages his scalp. ‘But there is a power in them like nothing I’ve ever...’ His voice trails off and his eyes fill with confusion. Then he turns to Halser. ‘I do not believe Ilissus has fallen to the Black Legion. Some great power is in control here, but it has no love of Chaos.’

Halser shakes his head furiously. ‘Of course the planet has fallen to Chaos. Inquisitor Mortmain was certain. Exterminatus is only hours away.’ He looks at

the rest of the squad, picking their way across the brutalised landscape. The inquisitor's acolyte is tiny in comparison, leaning heavily on his cane as he stumbles after the Space Marines. 'Pylcrafte said the clouds were a mark of Chaos. He said they arrived with the Black Legion.'

Comus locks his gaze on the sergeant. 'I do not place much faith in the words of that man. I sense he is holding something from us.'

Halser shrugs off the Librarian's grip and nods at the horizon. 'Well, we will find out the truth soon enough if we keep moving. We only have six hours. Then Inquisitor Mortmain will begin the bombardment, Chaos or not.'

They have not travelled far when shots ring out again.

The squad vanishes silently into the storm.

Sergeant Halser drops behind a trunk of rock. 'Brother Vortimer,' he hisses into his vox-bead, 'Is anyone hit? What do you see?'

The reply is a burst of white noise.

'Brother Vortimer?'

There is another hiss of static, but this time words are audible beneath the distortion. 'Bolter fire. The shots went wide. They are holed up in some kind of building. Half a kilometre east. It might be a tower but I can't be—'

The signal dies.

Halser feels his pulse quicken. He will not lose another man. He opens up the comm-net to include the whole squad. 'Brothers Vortimer, Borellus and Sabine: circle around, approach from the rear. The rest of you hold your positions. Wait for my signal.'

He turns to face Comus. 'Is this the power you felt?'

The Librarian shakes his head. 'This *is* Traitor Marines.' He frowns. 'They are in such terrible pain.'

Halser looks at his auspex and curses the blank screen. Then, as a particularly fierce dust cloud twists past, he risks a glance around the stone. Brother Vortimer is right; there is some kind of building to the east. As the clouds roll past he sees it quite clearly: a fluted spiral of rock, topped with crumbling, teeth-like projections that resemble the merlons of a castle. It looks to be part of a larger building, but before he can make out anything else he sees movement behind the jagged stone. As he ducks out of view he glimpses a flash of light.

A fizzing whine cuts through the storm and, a few metres to the left of Halser, the ground dissolves into a cloud of dust and spinning rock. As stone pings off his armour the sergeant curses. 'Lascannon.' He looks back at Comus.

‘They’re not in too much pain to fire their weapons.’

Comus shakes his head. ‘Something is badly wrong with them, though. Why do you think their aim is so bad?’

Halser nods at a narrow trench a few feet back, and as they drop heavily into it he opens up the comm-net. ‘Vortimer, Borellus, Sabine – are you in position? What do you see?’

Halser receives his answer in the form of gunfire: a whole volley of rattling shots that ring out from the tower.

‘Move in!’ he cries, leaping from the trench and racing in the direction of the gunfire.



Chapter Six

Palchus awakes to darkness and the sound of rattling chains.

He tries to move but an awful, wrenching pain explodes in his stomach. ‘Who’s there?’ he gasps, trying to stand. To his horror, he realises he is trapped. Thick, leather straps are wrapped around him, binding him to some kind of metal chair. Terror grips him. ‘You don’t realise what you’re doing!’ he cries, peering into the shifting shadows. ‘I belong to the House of van Tol.’

The sound of scraping metal continues, but there is no reply.

Palchus raises his voice into something approaching a scream. ‘I am Navis Nobilite! You may *not* treat me like this!’ He strains to free himself from the chair and feels the awful pain in his stomach again. Something is embedded in his flesh and he realises his jacket is drenched with blood. ‘What have you done to me?’

Finally there is a reply: a liquid gurgle that comes from somewhere behind him. The words make no sense whatsoever but, simultaneously, Palchus becomes aware of something else. As the vile belching sound fills the darkness, the Navigator feels words forming in his mind. He realises, to his amazement, that the small, hard eye embedded in his forehead is processing the gibberish into a language he can understand. It is as though the warp itself is speaking to him. Every syllable adds to his pain, like needles being pressed into his brain.

‘You did that to yourself, actually.’ The words appear as thoughts, rather than sound, and the thoughts are full of hate. The sense of malice is so great that the Navigator lets out an involuntary whine.

‘Did what?’ he manages to gasp eventually.

‘You have quite literally fallen on your sword, Palchus.’

The Navigator peers down at his stomach. It is too dark to see anything clearly, but he can just about make out a glimmer of twisted steel, jammed into

his belly. 'I need help then!' he cries. 'You can't just leave me like this.' His fear starts to mingle with rage. 'Who *are* you?'

The burbled reply makes no sense but, as before, words appear in Palchus's head. 'I have more names than I care to remember. Some of them might make sense to you, I suppose, but none of them come close to the truth. My current master calls me Cerbalus. That will suffice for one such as you.'

Palchus latches desperately on to these shreds of information. 'Your master? Who is your master? Let me speak with him. As soon as he realises who I am, you will find—'

'Oh, Inquisitor Mortmain knows very well who you are, Palchus van Tol. You are here on his instructions, in fact.'

Despite his agony, Palchus lets out an incredulous laugh. 'Mortmain? He would not dare!'

The darkness fills with the sound of scraping metal and a face appears directly in front of Palchus. It is the most terrifying thing the Navigator has ever seen. It must once have belonged to a mortal, living man, but now it is a fleshy casket, straining to contain a writhing, unspeakable horror. The shaven scalp has split in several places, revealing cherry-coloured coils of bone and a faint, shimmering light. The eyes have been scorched away, leaving two blackened pits, with cold blue fire shimmering in their centres. The whole head is torn and misshapen. Only one thing seems to be holding the mangled lump together: a mass of rusty chains snake in and out of the face, embedded deep in the bones and glinting dully as the mouth opens in a wide, toothless grin. 'Oh, you would be surprised at what he dares.'

As the ruptured flesh talks, Palchus sees the reason for the gurgling, moist quality of its voice. The thing's throat is torn and ruined, and its vocal cords are clearly exposed, rattling loosely in a nest of glistening muscle.

Palchus tries to pull back from the monster. Terrible as its appearance is, the thing that really appals him is the voice in his head. The words are so unnatural and malignant he can feel his mind buckling under the strain. This is no mortal creature leaning over him. Something unholy has been bound into the flesh of man. The word 'daemon' drifts into his thoughts, but he tries to squash it before madness overwhelms him. 'You have to help me,' he gasps.

'Of course I do,' answers the pile of gore and chain. 'Mortmain was most concerned for your safety. I cannot leave you in this awkward condition.'

Palchus screams. The monster has placed a hand on the sword in his belly and is tugging it up towards his ribcage.

‘Of course,’ it continues when the Navigator is quiet again, ‘I can remove this blade quickly or slowly. I can remove it with care, or less care.’

‘What do you want of me?’ moans the Navigator, as fresh blood pools in his lap.

‘I want you to talk, Palchus, that is all. There is no need for any more unpleasantness. I just need to know why you and your family have come to the *Domitus*.’

Palchus sees a glimmer of hope, then sighs as he realises the truth of his situation. Strangely, he feels his fear diminishing slightly as he accepts his fate. ‘You could never let me live. Not now you’ve told me who your master is.’

There is another rattle of shifting chains and something appears in front of Palchus’s face. It is the monster’s hand. The fingers are grey and crooked. Gleaming patches of bone are visible beneath lines of jagged, crudely sewn skin. The nails are purple and torn. But it is not the ruined flesh that Palchus notices, it is the long, metal syringe in its grip.

‘You’re quite wrong,’ explains the voice in Palchus’s head. ‘If you would just talk to me, I can wipe away all memory of this encounter. My master has an endearing propensity for mercy, you see. He has specifically requested that I try to help you. You will be found slumped in a gutter, near the slaves’ quarters, wounded but alive, and your father will reprimand you for nearly getting yourself killed.’ The monster brings the needle closer to Palchus’s face so that he can see the liquid dripping from its tip. ‘All you need to do is explain why you have not left for Terra. What is your family’s particular interest in this planet? What links you to Ilissus?’

Palchus’s heart begins to race again as he sees that he might be able to survive after all. All he need do is tell the monster about the true cause of Ilissus’s storms.

The ravaged face moves closer, sensing that the Navigator is about to speak.

Then Palchus closes his eyes and bites down hard on his lip. To his surprise, he realises that something means more to him than his own precious life. How could he confide in this creature? If the truth about Ilissus were revealed, it would be the end of everything; the end of House van Tol. Their long, distinguished history would be stricken from Imperial records. His glorious lineage would be made worthless. Their properties would be taken and, worst of all, they would be disgraced. The whole of Terra would think that Palchus van Tol was the son of a traitor.

Palchus groans in torment. ‘I won’t tell you anything,’ he whispers, unable to

believe what he is saying.

The monster leans on the broken sword and sends another bolt of agony through Palchus's stomach. 'Are you sure?' A long, rusty knife appears in front of Palchus's face. 'I'm more than happy to extract the information from you, but people don't generally enjoy my methods.'

Palchus knows all too well the methods that are likely to be employed by an Inquisitorial lackey, but there is a new sensation mixed with his abject terror: a surety that he cannot let this dreadful being discover the truth. 'Some things are worth dying for,' he says quietly.

The thing laughs. 'Oh, you won't die, Palchus, I will make sure of that.' The blade presses against the Navigator's trembling throat. 'I'm very skilled at my craft. I've had millennia to perfect it.'

Palchus's voice remains oddly calm as he replies. 'My father had doubts about coming to the *Domitus*. He knew it would be disastrous if one of us spoke out of turn. His great fear was that Mortmain might discover the truth.'

'The truth, Palchus? What *is* the truth?'

Palchus lifts his chin and flares his nostrils. 'The truth is that you will get nothing from me. My father foresaw just this kind of eventuality. He made us take precautions.'

The voice in Palchus's head sounds excited, as though trying to contain laughter. 'Precautions? What do you mean? What kind of—'

The sentence goes unfinished as Palchus stamps his right foot on the stone floor with all his strength. The heel of his boot collapses and the explosive charge contained within fills the chamber with blinding light.

The blast is so powerful that the sound travels several kilometres, to a small, dingy chamber, where Palchus's father looks up in alarm.



Chapter Seven

The ground splits and churns as Halser races towards the tower. Rocks and bolter shells rattle against his helmet as he weaves through the enemy blasts. At the foot of the building he launches his power-armoured bulk against a rotten door and it implodes in spectacular fashion, sending him tumbling into a small courtyard. The gunfire grows even more frenzied, but the sergeant turns his tumble into a roll and clatters across the exploding flagstones, scraping to a halt behind a ruined well and raising his bolt pistol to return fire.

He sees a row of Traitor Marines, slumped against the undulating parapet at the top of the strange tower. One of them is carrying a twisted, horned lump of metal. At first Halser cannot recognise it, but as a beam of crackling blue light erupts from the thing's barrel, he realises it is a lascannon.

The well disintegrates and Halser is thrown back across the courtyard. The impact would have killed a mortal man, but the sergeant's power armour softens the blast with a wheeze of hydraulics, allowing him to roll clear, unharmed. As a second Traitor Marine opens fire with an equally grotesque bolt pistol, Halser stands and calmly fires back. Shots ring out from several directions at once, filling the courtyard with light, sound and smoke, and making it impossible to see anything. Power-armoured boots pound back and forth, and metallic voices ring out through the din.

Halser cannot be sure if he has hit anything. He tries to aim at the traitor with the lascannon, but the drifting smoke makes it impossible to be sure what he is seeing. Twice he almost fires and then lowers his weapon, afraid of hitting one of his own men. He sees a flash of sparking metal to his left. Comus is jamming his force sword into someone Halser cannot see. There is a screech of grinding metal as the Librarian wrenches his blade free, painting the clouds red as he staggers back and prepares to swing again. 'Their shots are wild!' he cries,

levelling his sword at the walls. ‘Someone else is attacking them!’

Someone else? Halser pounds through the smoke to get a better view. As he nears the wall he sees the Chaos Marines lined up on the battlements. Comus is right. All of them are being twisted into bizarre positions: dragged awkwardly to one side or wrenched back over the wall. One of them manages to aim his bolter at Halser, but the shot whines past his head, missing by a metre as the traitor struggles to hang on to his gun.

Halser sprints through the whirling clouds, calling for the squad to advance as he spies a staircase at the foot of the circular wall. As he pounds up the crumbling steps, he sees the reason for the Chaos Marines’ odd poses. The clouds of smoke and dust have taken hold of them, wrapping around their misshapen power armour in hazy, shifting columns.

The traitor with the lascannon hefts it round to face the oncoming sergeant, but as he tries to aim he slumps forwards onto his knees, weighed down by the storm.

Halser raises his bolt pistol to fire and pauses in shock. His opponent’s leg is now encased in stone, stone that merges seamlessly with the clouds. The limbs of smoke are solidifying as they envelop the Chaos Marines, and morphing into rock. ‘By the Throne,’ gasps Halser, stumbling to a halt. He does not have long to consider the strangeness of the scene. The parapet behind him explodes as another shot goes wide. Halser puts aside his amazement and charges at the beleaguered enemy, jamming his rattling chainsword into the first breastplate he reaches and howling a battle-cry as he disappears in a shower of blood and shredded armour.

The others race up after him, firing calm, precise shots into the heaving mass. The enemy outnumber them two to one, but there is no contest. As the Relictors blast them apart, the Chaos Marines are wrenched to the ground by vast, animated banks of smoke. As they drop to the flagstones, the smoke forms spines of rock – just like all the other twisted pillars that cover the planet’s surface.

For a few minutes the clouds pulse with light as Halser and the others unleash a sustained volley at their howling foes. Then, as it becomes clear that there are no shots being fired in return, Halser wrenches his rattling chainsword from a limp body and staggers back, raising the bloody weapon over his head and turning to face his men.

The gunfire ceases and the Relictors lower their guns, surveying the carnage they have wrought. The walls of the tower are scorched and peppered with holes,

and the mangled remains of Chaos Marines lie sprawled across the blood-slick masonry. The Relictors watch in amazement as the columns lose their last shreds of smoke and settle into solid, fixed limbs of rock, enveloping the fallen like a shroud. Horned, groaning helmets adorn the towers like onyx studs in a vast piece of jewellery.

Halser counts the Space Marines gathered on the wall. Only seven have climbed up with him. There is no sign of Comus. He looks down into the courtyard and sees the Librarian's distinctive blue power armour, spread-eagled across the flagstones, surrounded by blood. A man is backing away from him, quickly disappearing into the rolling dust clouds.

The sergeant's pulse pounds in his ears, still charged with bloodlust and, without a second thought, he raises his pistol and guns down the receding figure. Only as he climbs down the steps does he see that the fallen man is unarmed and his robes are embroidered with Imperial insignia. Halser curses and turns the man over with his boot. He is still alive but gasping for breath and clutching feebly at the ragged hole in his shoulder. His robes must have originally been white, but they are quickly turning red. The wound looks bad but not fatal and Halser cannot decide whether that is a good or bad thing. The Imperial aquila is emblazoned across the man's chest, but there is something about him that reeks of heresy: both his eyes have been surgically removed, replaced by a two lines of ragged stitching, and a lump of crystal in the shape of a star has been hammered into his forehead.

The man tries to speak, but his words are muffled by the blood welling up in his mouth.

Halser crouches down next to him and raises him into a sitting position. 'What did you say?'

The wounded man spits a goblet of blood onto his chest and tries again. 'Stay away. Stay away from the prophet,' he gurgles, before being wracked by a terrible cough that dislodges even more blood.

'What?' asks Halser, looking anxiously at the slumped form of Comus, lying a couple of metres away. 'What prophet? Who are you talking about?'

'Astraeus,' he gasps, grasping Halser by the shoulders. 'You must allow him to complete his trials. You must not ruin his great work.'

'Astraeus?' Halser shakes his head. 'What great work?'

The man pulls himself closer and Halser has the unnerving sensation that he is looking at him through the crystal star. As he turns his head from side to side, the failing light refracts through the prism to reveal the grey, knotted brain

beneath. 'Ilissus is just the beginning. He will purge the entire galaxy.' He turns towards the columns of rock that have enveloped the Chaos Marines. 'The elements are now his to command. Soon, the Dark Powers will learn to crawl. The Great Enemy will grovel before him like a cur.' The man's voice grows shrill. 'But you must leave Ilissus! You will ruin everything—'

The man stiffens and lets out a hoarse croak as a smouldering hole appears in his chest. Blood fountains from his nose and he slumps back in the sergeant's arms.

Halser drops him and whirls around.

'Filthy idolator,' hisses Pylcrafte, lowering his laspistol and withdrawing his optical cables back into his hood.

Halser leaps to his feet and grabs Inquisitor Mortmain's acolyte by the throat, lifting him up from the ground and slamming him against the shattered wall. 'You do *not* make the decisions here!' His words are so loud that they emerge from his helmet as a distorted blast of noise.

Pylcrafte whines with a mixture of terror and outrage. 'This planet is damned! We cannot preserve the life of transgressors! The unsparing severity of the Emperor's wrath must be as swift as a—'

His words end in an explosion of air as Halser slams Pylcrafte onto the ground and aims his pistol at his undulating hood. 'Silence!' he howls, his whole body trembling with anger.

Pylcrafte looks up at the circle of Space Marines who have gathered around him. Every one of them has levelled a weapon at him. He mutters under his breath but says nothing more.

Halser looses him and turns away, waving his men over to the fallen Librarian. 'Comus,' he says, kneeling down beside him. 'Are you shot?'

The Librarian shakes his head and grimaces at the clouds undulating over their heads. 'No, I can continue.' He nods at the dead stranger. 'I'm starting to understand. The pilgrims never left Ilissus. They never died. They are still here, after all these centuries, but their worship has become confused.' He waves at the clouds again. 'The prophet he mentioned is somehow connected to all this. He is the one who has doomed Ilissus.' He clutches his head and groans in pain and confusion. 'But he is *not* a follower of the Ruinous Powers.'

Pylcrafte cannot hold his tongue. 'Then why have they defiled a shrine of the Immortal Emperor! What does it matter who their leader is? They are the worst kind of—'

At a nod from Halser, one of the Relictors steps forwards and clamps a

gauntleted hand over Pylcrafte's face.

'Whoever this prophet is, we are very close to him,' continues Comus as he sits up and looks around the courtyard. 'Either by chance or his design we have stumbled across one of the routes to his home.' He taps his finger against the small leather-bound book. 'According to the libellus, if we find the Zeuxis Scriptorium, we will find the prophet.'

Halser turns to look through the ruined walls of the tower. The sinking sun flashes crimson across the visor of his helmet. 'Come nightfall, Mortmain will begin the orbital bombardment. We have less than four hours left to find the scriptorium.' He lowers his voice. 'Brother Silvius and the others must manage without us.'

Comus shakes his head as Halser helps him to his feet. 'But what really is the use in finding the scriptorium, without any guidance from the *Domitus*?'

There is a hiss of escaping air as Halser removes his helmet. His brutal features are as red as the sky. 'This is our last chance, Comus, don't you understand? Mortmain is our only friend and our enemies are legion. We have to convince them all. We have to show them that our willingness to learn is not heresy, but the Imperium's last hope. We have the courage to go where the other Chapters will not. We are the only ones who—'

'You do not have to explain any of this to me,' interrupts the Librarian with a look of disbelief. He leads Halser a few paces away from the others and speaks in an urgent whisper. 'But how will we get off the planet before Mortmain begins dropping his bombs? If we cannot navigate the clouds, how will we make it off the planet alive? We have four hours left. Perhaps we should return to the gunship and see if we can help the tech-priests?'

A network of throbbing veins spreads across Halser's face and he hisses through gritted teeth. 'If we return empty handed we are dead anyway. You remember Captain Asamon's orders: find a weapon powerful enough to cleanse every world in the system. Only if the Inquisition sees our true potential will we have any hope of redemption. If we return now, with nothing, the Relictors are doomed. Every last one of us.' He clutches his hands together as though praying. 'But if we can show the strength of our faith, show them that we can wield even the most powerful artefacts, they will *have* to accept us once more as true servants of the Emperor.' As the sergeant looks around at the shattered tower there is an edge of mania to his voice. 'And anyway, what use do you think it would be returning to the gunship?' He waves at the dust clouds. 'We have no signal. How would we fly? I doubt we would make ten kilometres before hitting

a mountain.'

Comus narrows his eyes, unnerved by the sergeant's odd tone, but he cannot deny his logic. It was a miracle that they managed to land as well as they did. And since then the weather has become even more violent.

Halser pounds his chest armour. 'We're not done yet, Comus. I will not allow it!' He stamps one of his boots on the ground, surrounding them both in a cloud of dust. 'The Zeuxis Scriptorium is the best known of Ilissus's reliquaries. Think what treasures might be there.' He nods at the bloodstained flagstones. 'And you say it is also the source of all this,' he waves at the sky, 'sorcery. Why should we head back to the gunship without at least investigating this so-called prophet? I do not doubt he is a charlatan, but who knows what kinds of artefacts he is hoarding. Alone, without any Imperial support, he has outwitted the Black Legion. Think what that might mean! He has surrounded the whole planet with clouds that turn men to stone. How could he achieve such things? Perhaps by harnessing a forbidden text? Perhaps by uncovering a relic from the days when the Emperor Himself walked here?'

Comus shakes his head. 'I don't understand. You want us to head towards the man who has corrupted the whole planet?'

'Why not?' Halser's voice is a ragged snarl. 'By the Throne, Comus, can't you see? Maybe we *are* doomed, but at least we might end our days covered in glory. At least we might put an end to whatever monster is plaguing this wretched planet. And perhaps...' A trace of smile appears on his face. 'Perhaps we could find something that truly makes the trip worthwhile.'

The Librarian turns to look at the other Space Marines. They are waiting patiently for orders, as proud and noble as ever. He sighs and shakes his head. They do not deserve to die in Mortmain's firestorm, but he knows Halser is right: they are doomed anyway. For decades now, the Inquisition has been working towards their destruction. Perhaps this *would* be a more fitting end: death in battle, at the hands of the Imperium's foes, rather than excommunication and disgrace at the hands of a shadowy cabal. He looks back at the sergeant and falls quiet, unsure what to say. All the options seem black. Then he looks into Halser's eyes and sees how fiercely they are burning. If they have any hope at all, he decides, it is here – in the fury of Sergeant Halser.

Comus takes out the strange little book and attaches another cable to it. The others wait patiently as he prays. Even Pylcrafte ceases his struggles.

'I see another group of towers,' says the Librarian in a hoarse voice. 'Two kilometres south of this one. They are on the exact location of the underground

temple network that once housed various scriptoria, including Zeuxis. If we can make it that far, I believe we will find the man who is in control of Ilissus. What we would do then, I cannot imagine.'

Halser grabs the Librarian by both arms. 'Have faith, Comus.' He looks south and watches the spirals of wind, whipping across the desolate landscape. 'We will be heroes again, I promise you.'



Chapter Eight

Inquisitor Mortmain picks his way through chunks of glowing metal and smouldering flesh. The space where the interrogation chamber once stood is now a blackened wound. The blast was so fierce that several walls have buckled and fallen, creating an oddly liquid scene: girders, doors and coving lie draped over each other in a surreal slump of melted steel and shattered stone. Mortmain wrinkles his nose in distaste; the air is thick with the smell of charred meat. ‘Oh, Palchus,’ he breathes, kneeling to examine a pile of ash, ‘What did you do?’

A towering figure watches from the darkness: a hulking giant, clad in gleaming bare ceramite. As he steps closer, the light of Mortmain’s torch washes across the giant’s power armour, revealing rows of intricate letters engraved into every available space. When he speaks, his voice peals from his helmet like a sword being drawn. ‘Does it live?’

The inquisitor lifts a piece of broken chain from the rubble and holds it to his chest, muttering a prayer. ‘Emperor save us, Justicar Lyctus, it might.’ He looks up at the silver-clad Space Marine and shakes his head. ‘I’ve been a fool. Cerbalus must have seen this coming. Whatever the Navigator used to do this has broken the wards and bonds we used to bind the daemon. If it managed to latch on to any other living thing, it will now be loose on the *Domitus*.’ He rises and turns to face the Space Marine looming over him, his face utterly drained of colour. ‘Cerbalus knows everything. It knows that Ilissus is on the verge of plunging the whole sector into madness. If it lives, it will attempt to stop the Exterminatus.’

Justicar Lyctus seems unimpressed by the urgency in Mortmain’s voice. His glittering gauntlets remain draped calmly over the hilt of his halberd; if not for the faint light, flickering across the weapon’s blade, Lyctus could be mistaken for a statue. ‘What do you intend to do, inquisitor?’ he asks, in the same ringing tones.

Mortmain clutches his shaven scalp in both hands and mutters another curse. 'I have no choice.' He looks out through a misshapen viewport at the wraith-like planet below. 'I can wait no longer. Baron van Tol's wretched secrets will have to wait. I must destroy Ilissus now.' He looks back at the Space Marine and shakes his head in disbelief. 'Damn it all. If Cerbalus lives, I may already be too late. It will tear the *Domitus* apart.' He looks past Justicar Lyctus into the shattered remains of the corridor. The light of his torch reveals more glittering, statuesque figures. 'You and your squad must do what you can.' Mortmain places a hand on the cover of a metal book, hung around the Space Marine's cuirass. 'I will pray for you.'

Lyctus nods and envelops the inquisitor's hand in his own massive, silver gauntlet. 'If it lives, we will bring it to heel, Inquisitor Mortmain.'

Mortmain shakes his head and withdraws his hand. 'No, you will not, justicar. Not this one. Even you will be unable to destroy a horror such as Cerbalus.'

There is a hint of emotion in the Space Marine's reply that is either disbelief or injured pride. 'Then what are you asking?'

Mortmain looks up at him. 'If Cerbalus is free, we are already dead. But Ilissus must still be destroyed. Too much is at stake.' He looks out at the planet again. 'You must buy me whatever time you can. Find Cerbalus and throw yourself against it with all the fury you can muster. You cannot win against such a being, but you must try anyway. If you can keep the thing at bay long enough, I will be able to begin the bombardment of Ilissus.'

'And what about Sergeant Halser?'

Mortmain lowers his head. 'I will pray for him too.'



Chapter Nine

Baron Cornelius van Tol stumbles awkwardly to the door of his chamber, clumsy with fear. The dry, ironic tone is entirely absent from his voice as he calls for his guards. ‘Something is approaching,’ he cries as ranks of soldiers, wearing peaked caps and epaulettes, hurry towards him. ‘The inquisitor has sent some kind of...’ His words trail off and he seems unsure how to continue. He shakes his head. ‘No, not Mortmain, this is something else. Something worse. Man the doors!’

Rows of polished lasguns line the passageway as he emerges, peering anxiously into the dark. ‘Something is on the ship,’ he mutters, drawing a gold-plated pistol and training it on the rippling shadows. ‘The *Domitus* has been breached.’

A captain arrives, hastily fastening the collar of his uniform as he bows to the baron. ‘My lord, what has happened?’

Van Tol looks back at him, his eyes wild with fear. ‘Thayer. Didn’t you hear the explosion?’

The officer’s aristocratic features are identical to the baron’s, and as he sees van Tol’s fear his skin pales to the same shade of grey. He has never seen the baron show such emotion before. ‘I heard a noise, uncle, but I assumed it was just an engine fault. The *Domitus* is as ancient as the stars. Perhaps it was just—’

‘Palchus is dead!’ whispers the baron, clutching the officer by the shoulder. ‘I can feel his absence.’

‘Dead?’ Thayer’s mouth drops open. ‘How? Was it the inquisitor?’

The baron shakes his head and looks back at the darkened corridor. The night sights attached to his men’s guns send flickering red lines across the vaulted masonry, creating an unnerving sense of movement. ‘No. This is not Mortmain’s doing. Why would he attack his own flagship?’ He lowers his voice and pulls his

nephew closer. 'I can *see* something.' He taps the front of his cap. 'It's as though the immaterium has come after us and breached the hull.' He shakes his head in disbelief and looks at the floor. 'Palchus is *dead*.'

Captain Thayer frowns. 'The warp has entered the ship? What do you mean? How could that happen now? We're in real space.'

The baron gives a vague nod and starts to reply, but his words are lost beneath the whining screech of las-fire.

The two officers turn to find that the corridor has erupted with crackling energy as the soldiers fire wildly into the darkness.

They both raise their pistols and crouch next to the other soldiers.

'What is it?' cries the baron to the man next to him, struggling to be heard over the noise. 'What did you see?'

The soldier shakes his head, clearly terrified. 'I saw nothing,' he admits, 'but the others—'

'Hold your fire!' cries the baron, realising that his men are jumping at shadows, infected by his panic.

The shots continue for a few more seconds, until the baron manages to make himself heard. Then, one by one, the soldiers lower their guns and look towards him.

'My lord,' cries a man at the front of the group. 'There was something there. I couldn't see exactly, but it was moving quickly.'

'And what if it was one of our own sentries?' asks the baron, rising to his feet and peering into the dark.

The soldier's mouth flaps wordlessly as he fails to think of a suitable answer.

'Perhaps you should go and see what you've been incinerating?' The baron's voice is sharp with grief. 'If you're so certain you saw something.'

The soldier's eyes widen in fear. Then he regains a semblance of self-control and rises to his feet, adjusting his cap and giving a stiff salute before stepping away from the rest of the men. He keeps his lasgun levelled at the oily shadows as he edges forwards. The others watch in anxious silence as he approaches a gloom-shrouded fork in the passageway.

'I might have been mistaken,' says the soldier, looking up and down the corridors. He peers down the barrel of his gun, scoping the shadows for movement, but sees nothing. The relief on his face is visible, even in the half-light. Then his eyes narrow as he spots a darker shadow slip across the floor towards him. He mutters something, but the words are too quiet for the others to hear.

‘What was that?’ calls Captain Thayer, leaning around his uncle for a better look.

‘Nothing,’ replies the soldier, raising his voice. ‘I think it’s just a rat.’

‘A rat?’ Thayer looks at his uncle in disbelief.

‘That’s not it,’ hisses the baron, fixing Captain Thayer with a wild stare.

‘There *is* something out there.’

‘Kaleb?’ cries one of the soldiers. ‘What’s the matter?’

The baron and the captain look back down the corridor and see that the soldier has started acting strangely. His body has been gripped by some kind of spasm. ‘A rat!’ he cries in an odd-sounding voice. The words sound as though they are echoing in a vast cavern and as he cries out again the sound draws out into a long, rolling bellow.

‘Kaleb?’ calls out another voice, but the soldier’s fit is growing rapidly worse. His head is jerking from side to side, spraying spit and curses as his legs collapse beneath him.

A few of the soldiers start moving towards him, but the baron halts them with a barked order: ‘Halt! Hold your positions, damn you!’

The soldiers’ desire to aid their fallen comrade is short-lived. As they watch in horror, his flesh starts to ripple and bulge, like a sheet caught in the wind.

‘I knew it,’ breathes the baron as the soldier’s arms and legs begin to elongate, forming a teetering, arachnid frenzy of limbs, lashing violently back and forth across the stone floor and filling the air with a horrible, wet thumping sound.

‘Kill it,’ he whispers, but nobody hears.

The writhing mass lurches up from the shadows and the soldiers back away in horror. The thing that was Kaleb is now a five-metre nest of twitching limbs, surrounding a yellow, egg-shaped sack that quivers with revolting, subcutaneous shapes.

‘Kill it!’ repeats the baron. His voice is now a scream and before his men have a chance to respond, he begins firing his laspistol at the nightmarish vision.

Gunfire throws back the darkness for a second time, as the soldiers unleash a desperate volley of las-fire at the approaching colossus. The light is dazzling. It is impossible to see anything clearly so the soldiers fire blind, screaming as they register the full horror of what they have seen. The onslaught continues for several minutes, until finally the baron calls a halt.

As the echoes and smoke drift away the soldiers peer at the distant, hulking shape blocking the far end of the corridor.

Someone screams.

The monster has absorbed every shot as a welcome, nourishing feast. The featureless sack that passes for its head is now pulsing with inner fire and its jumble of spider limbs has swelled to three times the size, completely filling the passageway.

A few of the men begin firing again. A few drop to their knees and clutch their heads, their minds splintered. The rest turn and flee, dropping their guns as they race past the baron and disappear into the dark.

'Uncle,' gasps Captain Thayer, pulling at the baron's arm. 'Run.' To his horror, he realises that his uncle's face has gone slack and his eyes are fixed in an unblinking stare, locked on the undulating mass squeezing down the passageway. He tries again to drag the baron after his fleeing men, but van Tol will not move. Thayer keeps his gaze averted from the approaching mass, sure his mind will break if he looks at it even briefly, but he senses that the featureless sack is turned towards his uncle, as though the monster has singled him out amongst the crowd of terrified soldiers. 'Uncle,' he repeats in a tremulous wail, barely recognisable as speech. Finally, as he sees the forest of limbs in the corner of his vision, slithering across the ground towards him, he lets go of the baron's arm and bolts, sprinting after the others.

The baron is not conscious of his nephew's departure. He is not conscious of the figures dashing past him. He is not even conscious of his own being. All he sees is the vast, pallid, featureless head looming out of the darkness, fixed determinedly on him.

The creature heaves its awkward, pulsating bulk the last few metres to the baron, then reaches out with several of its triple jointed limbs. It grasps the baron in a delicate embrace and picks him carefully from the ground, lifting him towards its trembling, bloated head. For a second it holds him there, just a few centimetres away from the gleaming expanse of skin, then it shoves him through the membrane with a liquid *plop* and he vanishes from view.

The baron finds himself drowning in a saffron-coloured sea. The liquid fills his ears and rushes down his throat but, despite the absurd horror of his situation, van Tol feels a part of his mind step back, calmly removing itself from the agony of his death throes. This fragment of sentience is not even surprised to hear a voice, drifting through the yellow fluid.

'Baron van Tol,' it says in a perfectly reasonable tone.

The baron feels an inexplicable swell of pride that his murderer should know his name.

‘What is down there, baron, on Ilissus?’

The baron’s lungs are already full of the creature’s fluid and there is no way he can form speech, but as life slips away from him, he answers with his mind, delighted to be able to answer the god-like being that is digesting him.

He feels sure his answer will come as a surprise.



Chapter Ten

Gideon Pylcrafte kneels in the dust and mutters a prayer. The towers rising up ahead of him defy all logic. They resemble the fossil of a tornado, preserved at its most destructive: frozen, twisted spirals of rock, ten times taller than anything they have yet seen. They lean and bulge in a way that should send them toppling to the ground, but instead of falling they weave several kilometres up into the churning sky, towering over everything. ‘Sweet, merciful Emperor,’ moans Pylcrafte, shaking his mass of cables, ‘save us from this place.’

Sergeant Halser lets out a bitter laugh. ‘I think we will have to save ourselves.’

Halser, Comus and the rest of the squad are stood behind Pylcrafte on a lip of rock, also surveying the mountainous towers. If they feel any of Pylcrafte’s horror, it is hidden behind their expressionless helmets. Only the Librarian has his face exposed to the needling dust and he is poring over the book chained to his power armour.

‘According to the libellus,’ he says, tracing a finger over the murky screen, ‘the Emperor once paused here to rest. In those days the planet was a verdant haven, full of life. The natives flooded the towns and cities, showering their saviour with rose petals and chanting His name. It must have been something to see.’ Comus looks up and his face is a mask of pain. Blood is flowing freely from his eyes and his skin is as grey as the lifeless rocks. He closes the book. ‘Whoever rules this place now is a saviour of a different kind.’

Sergeant Halser nods. Even through the grille of his helmet his voice betrays his excitement. ‘But a saviour nonetheless.’ He nods at Pylcrafte. ‘Inquisitor Mortmain believed this place was crawling with the Black Legion. And what have we seen? A few pitiful stragglers at most. This prophet clearly has great weapons at his command.’

Pylcrafte climbs to his feet and points his cane in the direction of the towering peaks. 'How can you say such things? Look at that! It *reeks* of sorcery! My master gave you license to investigate ruins, not to consort with magicians and apostates!'

Halser grips the hilt of his chainsword and speaks in a series of explosive barks. 'Keep. Your. Mouth. Shut.'

Mortmain's acolyte clutches an I-shaped medallion as though it will ward off the sergeant's fury. 'I am my master's eyes and ears, Sergeant Halser, you would do well to remember that.'

Halser lets out an incoherent howl and rises up over him, but Comus steps forwards and places a hand on his arm, looking at him with pain-filled eyes.

Halser backs away with a curse and waves his men towards the towering shapes. 'Don't just stand there, move!'

The Relictors climb down from the lip of rock and start making their way across a featureless plain towards the warped peaks. The scene resembles a clearing in a forest of stone, and as the Space Marines lurch and stumble through the knee-deep dust, they keep their guns trained on the horizon, conscious of how exposed they are, even in the golden, hazy dusk. As they near the columns of rock they realise they are the beginnings of a bizarre mountain range. As they climb a gradual incline, they see dozens more of the teetering spires stretching away across the horizon.

'Are you sure this is the right place?' calls Sergeant Halser through the swirling dust.

Comus nods. His chin and neck are slick with blood and his face is white with pain. He is leaning heavily on one of the other Relictors. 'The xenos device is pointing here. The Zeuxis Scriptorium is hidden somewhere in these mountains. And the air is so thick with prayers, I can hardly breathe.' He waves weakly over the sergeant's shoulder. 'They are coming to greet you.'

Halser peers through the clouds and sees a group of tiny silhouettes rippling through the storm. He signals for his men to fan out and keep their guns on the approaching figures.

Even in their servo-powered suits, the Space Marines find it almost impossible to walk through the shifting terrain and it takes another fifteen minutes to reach the men. There are three of them: skeletal, shaven-headed wretches dressed in white, priestly robes. As they bow in greeting, light flickers across the star-shaped crystals embedded in their foreheads. Each of them has a line of thick, black stitches where their eyes should be.

‘Heretics,’ mutters Pylcrafte inside his hood, quietly enough that Sergeant Halser does not hear. ‘How can they see without eyes? Unless they have witch-sight.’

‘Friends!’ cries one of the men in heavily accented Low Gothic, holding up his hands in greeting.

Sergeant Halser notices that none of them are carrying weapons but keeps his gun raised just the same. ‘Who are you?’

The man beams back at him, delighted by the question. ‘We’re the Sons of Astraeus.’ He signals for the two men behind him to approach. ‘I’m Frater Gortyn. This is Frater Eusebius. And this is Frater Carmina. We are Pilgrims of the Sacred Light.’ He points at the tower behind them. ‘It is by our will, and the will of Astraeus himself that you have been allowed to find your way here.’

Sergeant Halser feels his hackles rising at the word ‘allowed’ but manages to keep his reply reasonably civil. ‘And where is “here”?’

Frater Gortyn steps towards him with his hands still outstretched in greeting and Halser notices that they are wrapped in a silken mesh that stretches around his fingers, giving them a webbed appearance.

The pilgrim’s smile grows even wider. ‘You have found that which the enemy never could.’ He looks past the Space Marines to the rocky outcrop at the edge of the plain. ‘But we should talk once we are safely through the catacombs. Even now, the Great Enemy has not completely withdrawn from Ilissus. Astraeus has recently turned his thoughts to the celestial bodies. He cannot devote as much time to material concerns as he once did.’ The pilgrim waves at the mountains. ‘We can relax once we are in the city.’

Sergeant Halser gives Comus a questioning glance, but the Librarian’s only reply is a shrug.

At the sight of Halser’s hesitation, Frater Gortyn’s smile falters. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘We have travelled a long way,’ replies Halser. ‘We have come from the celestial bodies that you mentioned, in search of an ancient scriptorium. Have you heard of such a thing? It was once known as the Zeuxis Scriptorium.’

The pilgrim smiles again and makes a strange little gesture with his hands, as though scattering light from the crystal in his head. ‘Astraeus knows everything.’ His voice is a droning chant. ‘All questions shall be answered. All truths shall be revealed.’

Halser studies the white-clad figures for a moment, taking in their thin, wasted bodies, gangly, feeble limbs and gaunt, eyeless faces. Despite the eagle

designs daubed on their robes, everything about them screams heretic. He has seen the same vacant, blissful smile countless times before, on a hundred worlds, and it has only ever meant one thing: corruption. Without looking back he can sense Inquisitor Mortmain's lackey staring at him, willing him to execute them, and for once he is not sure that Pylcrafte's puritanism is misplaced. Doubt grips him and quickly morphs into anger. He feels as though he is teetering on the brink of something without knowing which way to fall. He scowls at his men as they wait patiently for his next move; their faith in him is as complete as it is unquestioning. Even Comus is staring at him, his eyes as full of hope as they are of blood. Halser looks past him at the sunset. The knotted branches of cloud are taking on a crimson sheen as the day's light slips from the sky. Only a few more hours, he thinks.

He turns back to the mutilated pilgrims. 'I am Sergeant Halser. We are the Emperor's Adeptus Astartes. Lead on.'



Chapter Eleven

Captain Thayer van Tol weeps as he runs, sprinting past crowds of wailing crewmen, Imperial Navy officers and his own, whimpering guards.

Behind him the *Domitus* is being devoured.

The battleship screams along with its crew as a monster tears into its brittle flesh.

The captain flings open a door and pounds up a flight of stairs, struggling to maintain his balance as a series of violent spasms rock the corridor, tearing support struts from the walls and firing rivets across the splintering floor. He slices through the carnage and bolts into a vast, open space. The ceiling disappears into cavernous darkness, only interrupted by the occasional winged saint, peering down sadly at the crowds flooding into one of the *Domitus's* launch bays.

As he joins the terrified throng, Captain Thayer sees he was not the first to think of abandoning the doomed battleship. Thousands of desperate souls are clawing over each other in an attempt to reach the hulking rows of frigates and cruisers.

‘Make way for House van Tol!’ he cries, but his voice is lost, drowned beneath the general clamour. ‘Let me through!’ he demands, but nobody hears.

The chorus of screams grows as a vast shape tears through the wall on one side of the hangar. As the dust and debris settles, it becomes clear that Cerbalus has grown to surreal proportions. As its limbs unfold from the shadows, they dwarf even the beleaguered spacecraft, crumpling armoured hulls like tinfoil as they carry the daemon into the chamber. Then the egg-like head swings into view, hanging over the shrieking crowds like a sloshing, glistening moon.

Once more, Captain Thayer manages to look away before he takes in the full horror of the thing. He feels his mind tremble on the edge of collapse, but

manages not to plunge fully into the abyss. Others are less lucky. All around him rows of hardened crewmen drop to their knees, howling and clawing at their own eyes in an attempt to remove the vision that has ruined their minds.

The Navigator shouts prayers as he turns and flees back the way he came, vaulting over the toppling, drooling ranks of crewmen. He is conscious that the impossible monster is ploughing through the crowds towards him. The screams leap in pitch again as the thing stuffs hundreds of pitiful souls into its quivering head, spilling yellow fluid onto the crowds as it attempts to satisfy a dreadful, centuries-old hunger.

Thayer makes it back to the doorway, but sees to his horror that the stairs have collapsed. 'Emperor preserve us,' he gasps, looking around for another exit.

Those still sane enough to control their limbs are now flooding back out of the hangar and Captain Thayer finds himself barged and jostled into a corner. Terror overcomes him and he draws his laspistol. 'Stand back!' he screams, levelling the gun at rows of ashen faces. Nobody hears him and after a glimpse of the creature's teetering, spider-like limbs, a pistol does not make much of an impression.

As the crowds press closer Thayer loses control and begins firing indiscriminately into the crowd. Men, women and children are indistinguishable to him as he attempts to blast a path to another door. As quickly as the bodies tumble to the floor, more rush into the gaps they create. However desperately he fires, the captain only manages to move at a snail's pace, and all the while he senses the huge shape looming closer – smashing through the remaining ships and tearing statues from the balconies overhead.

'Let me through!' he screams again and, this time, to his amazement, the figures ahead of him *do* actually move to one side. Captain Thayer can barely believe his luck as he rushes towards the door.

He has only taken a few steps when he sees the reason for the gap in the crowd. A towering, glittering figure is striding towards him: a Space Marine, wearing flashing plates of unpainted power armour and carrying a halberd that shimmers with blue light. As he smashes effortlessly through the crowd, the Space Marine makes a formidable sight. The sheer bulk of him is incredible and every inch of the warrior is clad in thick, gleaming plate.

'Wait!' cries Captain Thayer, reaching out to the Space Marine, but he finds himself barged unceremoniously to one side as the warrior ploughs through the crowds towards the still-growing monster.

The captain scrambles back to his feet and manages to climb onto the

pedestal of a broken statue. As he looks out over the heaving throng, he catches other glimpses of silver, appearing at various points in the vast, shifting darkness. It seems almost as though they are arriving from nowhere. As Thayer watches in disbelief seven of the glittering figures materialise from the shadows and begin charging towards the mountain of thrashing limbs.

Thayer looks back at the door and sees that he has a chance to escape, but he finds he cannot leave. The scene unfolding before him is like a tale from the oldest legends: a giant creature from the warp, surrounded by glittering, armour-clad knights. The captain forgets his terror for a moment as he watches the Space Marines charge towards the thing that is devouring the ship.

The monster lifts its mountainous pile of limbs, severing a cluster of fuel pipes and spilling gouts of blue flame across the hangar. Whole swathes of the crowd ignite and their agonised shadows begin to dance and writhe across the walls.

The fire does not slow the Space Marines and as they race towards the writhing monster they raise their halberds with mute synchronicity, levelling the pulsing blades at its huge, arachnid limbs.

At the last minute, Captain Thayer looks away, unwilling to watch the creature feed on its silver-clad attackers. Then, rather than the sounds of messy consumption he was expecting, he hears a new sound: a thin, piercing whistle, so loud he has to clamp his hands over his ears. He looks back and sees to his amazement that the vile creature is rearing up in pain. The Space Marines' weapons are embedded deep in its legs and their power has spread across its flesh in a network of glittering, sapphire veins.

As he follows the lines of light, Thayer sees that they are racing towards the warp creature's featureless, sack-like head. The captain howls in fear, realising too late that he has made a terrible mistake: in his excitement he has looked directly at the thing. His mind recoils from the insanity of it. 'Mercy,' he groans, sliding down the pedestal onto the trembling floor. No mercy is forthcoming as his thoughts race down avenues best left unexplored. In a fraction of a second the captain perceives all the dreadful, pitiless lunacy of the universe. 'Mercy, mercy, mercy,' he repeats as screaming, burning figures barge past him. His shattered thoughts present him with a variety of disturbing images, one of which might be reality. He sees the monster lash out with its countless limbs, sending a Space Marine spinning through the air like a child's toy. The warrior flies up towards the gloomy, vaulted ceiling of the hangar, then plummets back down into the hellish inferno.

The vast hangar is quickly filling with flames and the temperature is rocketing. As Captain Thayer lies gibbering against the pedestal, the rows of faces racing past him begin to shimmer in the heat. Then he starts to question even that; is it really the heat making their features undulate and slide? There is something fierce and bestial about their expressions.

He looks back at the warp being and sees that, incredibly, most of the Space Marines are still attacking it. The light spreading from their halberds is blazing even brighter and the monster is recoiling in pain. Captain Thayer realises that the thin squealing sound is coming from its yellow, membranous head. 'Mercy,' he says again, but this time his tone is one of awed respect. Even from the depths of his growing madness, he realises the immensity of what they are doing. How can they be so calm, he wonders, in the face of such a mind-bending horror?

As the creature attempts to wrench its limbs free, its impossible bulk topples back against the wall of the chamber. The whole edifice teeters and as the wall gives way, so does a large section of the ceiling. Marble saints topple from the shadows: gleaming goliaths the size of houses explode as they slam down on the raging fires.

Still the Space Marines endure, climbing, mountaineer-like, up the monster's heaving bulk. Another one dies, pulped against the wall as a twitching, kilometre-long limb breaks free. But the rest simply thrust their blades deeper. The blue light is now so bright that the warp creature's innards are visible – pulsing like the flames below.

Captain Thayer realises that however hard they fight, the Space Marines have no hope. With every second that passes, the monster continues to grow in size and fury. Thayer starts to laugh. It is a wild, shrill sound, almost in tune with the monster's screams. As he laughs he places the muzzle of his pistol against his head and makes a final plea for mercy.



Chapter Twelve

As they enter the catacombs, Frater Gortyn plucks a torch from the walls and waves it around his head, pushing back the darkness to reveal a jumbled mess of broken headstones and shattered sarcophagi.

‘These old stones mark the heroism of a glorious age,’ he says, dusting down one of the inscriptions with his silk-clad hand.

Sergeant Halser’s eyes glitter hungrily in the flames. The names carved into the stones have long since faded, but their power still hangs heavy in the air. This is clearly the resting place of legendary figures. Rows of alcoves lead off into the darkness, each one filled with tall, pillared tombs, grandiose winged sculptures and faded murals. ‘Who were these champions?’ he asks, taking another torch from the wall and holding it over a tomb.

The gaunt-faced pilgrim still has the same, inane grin frozen on his face, even as he discusses the dead. ‘Forgotten heroes, Sergeant Halser, of the highest order. These men and women fought beside the Holy Emperor as He carved a great empire in the stars. Only the bravest and most loyal of His servants were interred in the sacred earth of Ilissus. For many decades they were brought here, as defiant and noble in death as they were in life. As the Emperor’s wars grew in ambition, the number of casualties grew too. But we cared for them all, placing their remains in the most beautiful caskets we could build and storing the spoils of their crusade in our most secret reliquaries.’

Brother-Librarian Comus is still hesitating at the entrance, but Frater Gortyn waves him in and hurries off down the aisles of gloomy alcoves. ‘But the Emperor never forgot his loyal comrades. He visited Ilissus several times in his star chariot. Many records from those days are still held in the scriptoria. They describe how the Emperor did not just come here to pay His respects, He came seeking solace and even advice when He was most sorely pressed. The Zeuxis

chamber contains several portraits of Him, kneeling at these very tombs.’

Most of the Relictors look around in awe, shocked by the idea that they might be treading in the Emperor’s footsteps, but Halser rushes after the pilgrims, lifting his torch higher. ‘Then the scriptorium *does* still exist!’

Frater Gortyn turns his grin back on the sergeant. ‘The Pilgrims of the Sacred Light have endured on Ilissus since the days of the Holy Emperor, guarding and waiting. When the Emperor’s fallen heroes came to us laden with strange, dangerous treasures, we swore to protect not just their memories, but their power. Our centuries of vigilance are recorded in great detail.’ His smile falters. ‘There were many dark years, of course.’ He waves at the dozens of smaller passageways that lead off from the main artery of the catacombs. ‘The Emperor’s visits ceased without explanation and we were forced to hide ourselves down here as the Great Enemy ran unchallenged, razing our forests and farms to the ground.’ Then the smile returns to his face and he makes the strange gesture again, flicking his fingers away from the crystal. ‘But finally the Emperor sent us a sign that He still lived. A star fell from the sky. And that star was His prophet, Astraeus.’

As the Relictors squeeze their armoured bulk past the mounds of shattered stone, the smaller, hooded shape of Pylcrafte hurries after them, eyeing the group of pilgrims with undisguised hate. ‘And just how did you survive all those “dark years”?’ He points his cane at the ceiling. ‘Hiding under a few rocks is not usually enough to avoid the snares of the Ruinous Powers.’

The bile in Pylcrafte’s voice is obvious to everyone except Frater Gortyn, who smiles cheerfully back at him. ‘You are quite right, friend. Over the years the black knights hunted us down without mercy. Our numbers dwindled and many priceless treasures had to be destroyed, lest they fall into the enemy’s hands.’

Pylcrafte shakes his head, but keeps his optical cables fixed on the grinning pilgrim. ‘And I suppose you had no option but to lay your hands on those “priceless treasures” and turn them against your foes? After all, why would you let your fraternity fail, when you had access to items of unnatural power?’ He shivers in disgust. ‘Whatever the source of that power might be.’

Frater Gortyn stumbles to a halt and shakes his head in speechless denial. The smile drops from his face.

One of the other pilgrims steps from the shadows, looking equally dismayed. ‘Oh, no. You don’t understand. We cannot *use* the objects left in our care. They are for the hands of the Emperor alone.’ He shrugs. ‘And the hands of His

prophet, of course.’

Pylcrafte sounds unconvinced, and Sergeant Halser makes no move to silence him, keen to hear more detail about the relics left in the scriptorium. ‘So how have you survived?’ demands Pylcrafte in a peevish tone. ‘It is a matter of Imperial record that the Black Legion landed on Ilissus in large numbers. How can your order have survived intact, unless...’ He draws himself erect and places a hand on the medallion swinging beneath his hood. ‘Unless you are in league with them?’

Frater Gortyn steps closer to Pylcrafte, oblivious to the revulsion his nearness induces in Inquisitor Mortmain’s acolyte. Despite his lack of eyes, the pilgrim reaches unerringly for Pylcrafte’s arm and grips it with his silk-bound fingers. ‘Some of us fell, it is true. Mephitis and Axum and many other places failed in their duty, overcome by fear, but who can really blame them?’

Pylcrafte snatches his arm free and jabs a finger at the pilgrim. ‘You do not even condemn their heresy, then?’ The cables under his hood flick out like snakes and focus on the Space Marines towering over them. ‘Did you hear that? He who excuses heresy must himself be a brother of the damned. He just said that they have survived down here for years, but we know that in recent times the planet has been utterly overrun by Chaos. How can they have survived? Answer me that?’

He draws his laspistol and levels it at Frater Gortyn. His voice is verging on a scream. ‘There is blatant heresy here, Sergeant Halser. Are you really willing to let it go unpunished? By the Emperor – they don’t even have eyes! How do they see? Will you really endorse such repugnant sin?’

‘Brother Volter,’ says the sergeant, with a nod to one of his men.

As the Space Marine steps towards him, Pylcrafte backs away, cursing, and holsters his gun.

Halser’s jaw ripples with muscle as he glares at the hooded figure. Then he turns to Frater Gortyn. ‘How *did* you survive?’

The pilgrim steps away from Pylcrafte and raises his hands in a gesture of bemused innocence. ‘Astraeus, of course.’ He frowns at the sergeant. ‘If you have travelled from the heavenly bodies surely you must know of the Emperor’s prophet? Have you never heard of Astraeus?’

Halser shakes his head and looks back at Comus. ‘Does the name mean anything to you? Is it recorded in the libellus?’

The Librarian is clutching his temples again, clearly in pain, but he manages to shake his head.

‘Well,’ exclaims Frater Gortyn, grinning at his fellow pilgrims. ‘It looks like we are going to spread a lot of happiness this day!’

They grin back at him, nodding eagerly.

‘The prophet is both father and shield,’ he continues, turning his crystal star in the direction of Pylcrafte. ‘He is one with Ilissus. He is one with the earth and the air. He blinds the eyes that would wish us harm.’

‘And this prophet,’ asks Halser, ‘is he here somewhere? We have very little time.’

‘Of course!’ beams Frater Gortyn. ‘He knows everything about you. He’s dying to meet you. He’s waiting for you in the City of Stars.’



Chapter Thirteen

Inquisitor Mortmain stands in the doorway for a moment, silhouetted by the inferno raging behind him. His leather cloak is lined with smoke and his shaven head is caked in blood. His eyes are as flat and lifeless as those of a corpse.

‘My lord?’ cries a young Naval officer, rushing towards him. ‘Are you injured?’

Mortmain gives no reply as he slams the door shut. He turns, aims his laspistol at the lock and fires repeatedly, turning the mechanism into a molten lump. Then he stands there in silence, staring at the door as the officer watches him anxiously.

‘The ship is lost,’ he announces after a few moments, without turning to face the officer.

The officer laughs nervously and looks around. They are standing at the end of a long antechamber that leads onto the bridge of the *Domitus*. Ranks of limbless, hooded servitors line the walls, grafted onto flickering control panels. Their pallid, slack-jawed faces show no sign of recognition but the officer hurries to the inquisitor’s side and lowers his voice. ‘Perhaps you should speak to the captain, I’m sure he can reassure you.’

Mortmain finally looks at the officer and sees that he is little more than a boy. The inquisitor shakes his head sadly, then says: ‘Lead me to him, son.’

Captain Severinus is a ruddy-faced bear of a man, with a wispy crown of red hair and a barrel chest that his braided jacket cannot quite hold in check. His reply is a deep bellow of laughter. ‘I do not think we should write off an Imperial battleship quite so easily, Inquisitor Mortmain. Do you realise what kind of manpower we have on board?’

Mortmain gives no reply, and the captain looks to his officers for an

explanation. They look as confused as he does.

‘What have you seen, Inquisitor Mortmain?’ The captain cannot entirely hide the fear in his voice. Whole sections of his ship are imploding without any sane explanation. The only information that *has* made its way back to him is the kind of lunatic gibberish that he would rather not consider.

The inquisitor looks at the hunched rows of servitors. ‘We don’t have much time. We will have to begin sooner than I thought.’ He grabs the captain by the arm and drags him back to his chair. ‘Give the order to drop into orbit. Alert the rest of the fleet. We must prepare the missiles for launch.’

Captain Severinus wrenches his arm free and his cheeks shift from red to purple. ‘I’m not a navy!’ he roars, drawing back his shoulders. ‘This is my ship, Inquisitor Mortmain. Show some bloody respect! *I* give the orders on this bridge. Even the Ordo Malleus can manage a little—’

Inquisitor Mortmain rounds on him with a snarl. ‘We’re going to die.’ His voice is low and dangerous. ‘Very soon.’

The captain shakes his head and opens his mouth to reply, but the inquisitor is too fast.

‘*Listen* to me!’ he roars. ‘We are going to die. All of us. But if you can shut up and listen for a second we may still be able to save the rest of the sector.’

Captain Severinus’s jaw drops. He has never heard the inquisitor’s voice raised before.

When he is sure he has the captain’s full attention, Mortmain gives a nod of satisfaction. ‘Good,’ he says, in a softer voice.

‘What is it? What has happened?’ asks the young officer.

Mortmain runs a hand over his blistered scalp and looks back at the door. The sounds of destruction are growing louder with every second that passes. Deep, rumbling explosions rock through the hull and the rattle of gunfire rings up through the mesh floor. It feels as though the ship is already in its death throes. ‘The immaterium has taken physical form. And it is hungry.’

‘What do you mean?’ The captain regains a little of his anger. ‘We left warp space weeks ago. How could such a thing happen?’

Mortmain looks at the floor for a moment, unsure how to reply. ‘There is no time to explain, captain. It is enough for you to understand that we are carrying a daemon. *A daemon*. It is making its way towards us, but it wants more than just our souls. I believe it will attempt to stop the Exterminatus.’

Captain Severinus drops heavily into his chair, looking dazed. ‘A daemon from the warp?’ He clutches his head. ‘How could that happen?’

‘What interest would such a thing have in Ilissus?’ asks one of the other officers, his face draining of colour. ‘The planet has already fallen to the Ruinous Powers.’

Mortmain looks out at the vaporous planet. ‘The daemon knows of our mission. It knows the strange nature of the weather that has been spreading from Ilissus. I believe it will attempt to save the planet and then feed the disturbance with its own life-force. No one entirely understands what is happening down there, but one thing is clear: if the disturbance is not curtailed immediately, we could be looking at a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions.’ He taps the tube of parchment clasped to his belt. ‘All these pretty signatures will be meaningless if the daemon manages to stoke whatever strange fire is burning down there. The temporal disturbances that have been plaguing this system could spread to the whole sector.’ He looks at the officer. ‘Even I cannot predict what would happen then.’ His voice drops even lower. ‘We must destroy the planet now, while our souls are still intact.’

Captain Severinus lifts his head from his hands. ‘But we’ve just sent men down there. And not just any men: Adeptus Astartes.’ His jabs a finger at the viewports. ‘One of them is your friend!’

Mortmain nods and closes his eyes for a second, but gives no other reply.

Severinus shakes his head. ‘There has to be a way to stop this thing. Even a daemon must have a weakness. Surely the Ordo Malleus has faced such things before?’ He narrows his eyes. ‘I hear that you have Space Marines in your own entourage, Inquisitor Mortmain. Adeptus Astartes who travel with an inquisitor? What horrors must they have seen? Surely they can do something to help?’

Mortmain scowls. The captain has been prying into things that do not concern him. Then he shrugs. What difference does it make now? He waves his hand at the door. ‘If you listen carefully, Captain Severinus, you can hear them dying.’

They all listen to the distant sounds of battle, the wailing of sirens and the groaning of the damaged ship.

Mortmain closes his eyes. ‘Their heroism is beyond reckoning, but it will not be enough.’

The captain’s cheeks flush darker. He places a hand on the hilt of his sabre and glares at Mortmain. ‘And what if you’re wrong? What if it’s our close proximity to Ilissus that’s causing the problems? If we enter attack formation we might open ourselves up to even greater danger. What if—’

Inquisitor Mortmain moves with unnerving speed. Before the captain can

finish his sentence he steps forwards, draws his laspistol and clubs him to the ground.

There is a loud *thud* as Captain Severinus slams onto the floor.

Mortmain calmly wipes a splash of blood from his cheek and looks around the circle of officers. His expression is a sharp contrast to their looks of shocked disbelief. 'I apologise for my rough manners, gentlemen,' he says, holstering his pistol, 'but we really don't have time for a debate. Does anyone else wish to question my authority?'

The officers shake their heads and back away, looking anxiously at the pool of blood spreading around their captain's head.

'See to him,' mutters the inquisitor, turning to the young officer.

As the youth kneels to examine the captain's injury, Mortmain addresses the others. 'Inform the rest of Fleet Sanctus. Prepare for bombardment.'



Chapter Fourteen

As they leave the catacombs Frater Gortyn steps proudly to one side so that the Relictors can enjoy the view.

Sergeant Halser is the first to emerge, taking a deep, grateful breath of evening air as he steps out onto a rocky promontory. He immediately staggers back and mutters an oath, stunned by the unexpected scene spread out before him. They have come out at one end of a long, steep-sided valley. The strange, convoluted mountains rear up on either side of them, dripping with scarlet fire, robed by the setting sun. It is not the sheer-sided peaks that cause Sergeant Halser to gasp, though. At the heart of the hidden valley lies a beautiful, glittering secret.

‘Welcome to Madrepore,’ sighs Frater Gortyn, his voice trembling. ‘The City of Stars.’

As the other Relictors climb up out of the shadows, they are as stunned as their sergeant. Madrepore is a small, walled city, designed in the shape of a five-pointed star and even in the fading light it sparkles like a polished jewel. The towering walls are as organic and coral-like as their surroundings, but they are also bedecked with countless shimmering lights. The whole structure has a shifting, pearlescent quality quite unlike anything the Space Marines have ever seen. It seems as though a portion of the heavens has fallen to earth and is slumbering amongst the mountains of Ilissus.

Halser steps further onto the ledge. ‘What is this place?’ He shakes his head. ‘That’s not Imperial architecture.’ He grabs the hilt of his chainsword and glares at the grinning pilgrims. ‘Where have you brought us? Is this a xenos city?’

‘Far from it. This is our home.’ The pilgrim laughs and points to a single tower that reaches even higher than the city’s outer walls. ‘Astraeus lifted these stones from beneath the ground with nothing but the power of prayer. His father,

the Emperor of Terra, bequeathed him the merest scintilla of his eternal light, but that was enough to create this blessed, beautiful haven.’ He waves at the surrounding mountains. ‘For decades we hid ourselves down here in this valley, guarding the ruins of the old scriptoria in the knowledge that one day, inevitably, the Great Enemy would find us. But then, when the prophet came, his prayers did more than build us a city – they also shrouded the valley from sight. Nobody can see over these peaks. If Astraeus had not willed it, even you could never have found this place.’

Sergeant Halser looks back at Brother-Librarian Comus with a raised eyebrow.

Comus nods in reply but is too weak to make comment. He has clasped the libellus back onto his belt, but there is no sign of his pain lessening. If not for the firm grip of Brother Volter, he would not have made it through the catacombs.

Halser looks down at the sparkling city walls. ‘What are the lights in the rock?’

Frater Gortyn’s smile becomes a giggle and he does not seem to have heard the question. ‘The prophet’s vision goes far beyond mortal sight. His mind is alive with countless images. He sees the movements of the heavens and the changing of the weather. In fact, he *is* the weather.’ Gortyn waves at the tumultuous clouds, merging seamlessly with the spirals of rock that cover the landscape. ‘What you see here is only a fraction of his power. The spirit of the Immortal Emperor has been harnessed and refracted through the prophet’s flesh. The towers you see out there are the fingers of Astraeus, reaching up and dragging us to salvation.’

Pylcrafte mutters under his hood and even Halser clenches his jaw. He has heard this kind of deluded cant before. He feels a growing sense of dread as the pilgrims lead the way down a narrow, stone stair, chuckling merrily to themselves as they go.

Unlike the rest of Ilissus, the land around Madrepore is flat and verdant. For several kilometres in every direction, well-tilled fields and herds of grazing cattle skirt the City of Stars. Clusters of adobe huts run alongside wide, tree-lined tracks, bustling with white-robed figures. After the desolation that preceded it, the Relictors struggle to comprehend the orderly scene spread out below them. Stranger still is the greeting they receive as they reach the valley floor and begin marching towards the city gates. The sound of power-armoured boots crunching down the road should cause a commotion, regardless of the

pilgrims' mutilated eyes. But as the Relictors march past, the groups labouring in the fields pay them no attention, as though the arrival of Space Marines is a daily occurrence.

'Do they not wonder who we are?' asks Sergeant Halser, turning to Frater Gortyn.

'They know who you are,' replies the pilgrim. 'We are all one with the mind of our father. Everything he sees, we see.'

Halser grimaces. Every minute he spends in the company of the pilgrims confirms his doubts. He looks around at the blind, toiling figures and mutters under his breath, horrified to see how confidently they swing their scythes and leap onto the back of moving carts. He decides to ask Gortyn about the star-shaped crystals in their foreheads but, before he can speak, he feels a tap on his shoulder and turns to see Comus. The Librarian is holding up the xenos device and tapping its screen. The casing is smeared with blood, but he has discerned something in the glyphs pulsing beneath the glass.

'I was right,' he gasps. 'The Zeuxis Scriptorium *is* here.' As he struggles to speak, energy arcs from the mantle of his power armour and crackles across his furrowed brow. 'Whoever this prophet is, he has built his city right over the top of one of the Ecclesiarchy's most ancient reliquaries.'

Halser pauses for a moment to let the pilgrims move ahead. 'Then we must gain entry to the scriptorium, by whatever means, and see what it is they're guarding. If the objects stored there are as powerful as they think, we may even find a way to navigate a way back through the storms.' He grabs the Librarian by the shoulder. 'Do you still have the strength to contact the others, back at the gunship? Could you summon them to this spot?'

Comus grimaces and nods at the blood-drenched book. 'This xenos filth is killing me.' He closes his eyes for a second. 'But yes, contacting them should still be possible.'

Sergeant Halser nods. 'Good. The repairs to the ship should be complete by now. It would take them minutes to reach us. We might be able to salvage a victory yet. If we can find something to help us see through these wretched storms, we could empty the scriptorium and be out of here before the bombs start falling.' He looks at the chronometer attached to his weapons belt. 'Inquisitor Mortmain has promised me another two hours.' He waves at the crowds of eyeless pilgrims shuffling through the fields. 'Then these dupes will receive their heavenly reward.'

Comus looks at the glittering walls looming ahead of them. 'And what if we

are unable to gain access to the scriptorium? What if we can't leave Ilissus before the Exterminatus begins?

Halser's habitual sneer grows even more pronounced. 'Then we all burn together.'



Chapter Fifteen

Justicar Lyctus crawls along the shattered remains of a girder, clutching his glimmering halberd to his chest while beneath him the hangar disintegrates. As the daemon continues to grow it has begun tearing holes through the ship's hull, its colossal, viscous mass growing more frenzied with every second. As the rest of Lyctus's squad struggle to hold it in place, the nest of segmented limbs jerk back and forth, wrenching machinery and support struts free from the walls and sending screaming crewmen sailing through the air. As Lyctus clings determinedly onto the girder, the *Domitus* is spilling its innards to the void, but he keeps his gaze locked on the heaving yellow sack at the centre of the mayhem.

As he nears the daemon, the justicar's armour begins to ripple with light. Countless inscriptions flash and shimmer, straining to protect Lyctus from the unholy power washing over him.

'Brothers,' he breathes into his vox-bead, 'just a few more minutes. Then lend me your faith. I'm almost overhead. I'm going to drop straight—'

Lyctus's words are cut short as a new sound is added to the cacophony: a barking claxon that cuts through the sound of grinding metal. At the same moment, in the areas of the hangar that are still intact, rows of red lights blink into life.

Justicar Lyctus curses as the daemon lurches back towards the gore-splattered hole in the wall.

From the furthest reaches of the *Domitus* comes the deep rumble of heavy munitions roaring into life.

'Justicar?' crackles a voice in Lyctus's helmet. 'Is it withdrawing?'

As the screaming crowds continue to charge past the Space Marines, the daemon heaves its revolting flesh upright and pauses for a moment, like a dog

that has caught a scent. The only movement is a slight trembling of its egg-like membrane.

Justicar Lyctus nods his head. 'Inquisitor Mortmain must have reached the bridge. He is preparing the Exterminatus.' Then, as the daemon starts to swing its bulk around, Lyctus realises they are about to miss their opportunity.

'Brother Gallus,' he snaps into the vox-bead. 'Your incinerator!'

The darkness is torn open by a column of flame. It leaps up from one of the Space Marines and envelops the featureless head of the daemon. The air fills with the smell of burning scented oil as the daemon jerks back, flinging its attackers across the hangar and emitting another high-pitched scream.

The thing thrashes in pain and Justicar Lyctus spots his chance, charging across the girder and leaping off the end, diving headlong at the daemon with his halberd held before him like a lance.

There is an explosion of pus, flame and psychic energy as he bursts through the wall of membrane and disappears from view.

Down below, on the blood-slick floor of the hangar, the rest of the Space Marines climb awkwardly to their feet. Some of them have wide, bloody gashes in their power armour and some topple back onto the mounds of corpses, gasping in pain, but one of them, Brother Gallus, swings his heavy, two-handed weapon around for a second shot, lighting up the vast chamber with another dripping arch of fire.

Justicar Lyctus sinks through the daemon's flesh, feeling its ancient malice clawing at his soul. Every liturgy and prayer inscribed into his armour burns with the strain of upholding his sanity. The Emperor preserves, thinks Lyctus, drawing on his bottomless, inviolable well of faith. Three centuries of devotion shield him, even as he feels his armour warp and crack. 'I rebuke you, Cerbalus,' he whispers, knowing that the daemon can hear. 'I forbid you to exist.'

As Gallus struggles to hold his bucking, thrashing incinerator, he senses his injured battle-brothers lining up beside him. As the column of flame forces the daemon back into a corner of the hangar, the other Space Marines begin firing their own psychically-charged weapons. A blinding volley of fire, metal and faith tears into the lurching daemon.

'Advance!' orders Brother Gallus, his voice calm and sure.

As they approach the daemon, its head begins to pulse with light, becoming a kaleidoscope of different colours as it jerks from side to side. At the heart of the display is a silvery core: Justicar Lyctus's shape is recognisable as he spins in the daemon's mind. Then, with another explosion of energy and gunk, the justicar's

halberd bursts from the flame-shrouded sack.

The daemon's head begins to split open, vomiting brains across its hideous legs and changing its piercing cry to a moist, popping gurgle.

The daemon's head collapses and Justicar Lyctus tumbles into view, spewed out on a virulent, yellow wave. He clatters to the hangar floor, shrouded in smoke and sparks and then lurches to his feet, stepping clear seconds before a tree-sized limb slams down where he landed.

There is no victory cry from Lyctus's men as they surround the collapsing daemon. They simply maintain their unrelenting volley of blessed promethium and bolter shells, forcing it back into the corner.

Justicar Lyctus staggers drunkenly towards his men, still clutching his blazing halberd. His armour has been scorched and wrenched out of shape and his bloody chin is visible through a rent in his helmet, but as he joins the other ranks of Space Marines he raises his fist and fires a screaming volley of shells from the storm bolter mounted on his wrist. As he shoots he repeats his cry: 'I rebuke you, Cerbalus!'

The daemon collapses into a wall of billowing flames and disappears from view.

After firing a few more rounds, Justicar Lyctus opens his raised fist, signalling for his men to hold their fire.

For a second the daemon falls quiet, but the hangar is still a riot of noise and colour: the claxons are blaring; crowds of crewmen and servitors are crushed against the various exits, screaming desperately as others are sucked out into the void. Banks of blue flame are still gushing from the severed fuel pipes and the *Domitus* itself is howling as its infrastructure gives way, wrenched out of the holes torn by the daemon's violence.

Lyctus keeps his hand raised as he edges closer to the rolling flames.

There is a flash of light and a shape flies towards him. A lean, red, humanoid figure that towers over the Space Marines as it crashes through them and bolts towards one of the exits.

Lyctus and the others fire wildly after it, but the blood-red figure carves straight through the crowds and dashes through the exit, disappearing from view.

Justicar Lyctus rises painfully to his feet. His armour is ruined and bloody, and half his men are dead. He nods calmly as he surveys the carnage. Then he speaks, not to his groaning men but to Inquisitor Mortmain, on the far side of the ship. 'You were right. It will be with you in minutes. We will attempt to pursue.' He pauses and kneels, trying to stem the blood rushing from one of his men's

throats. 'Our prayers are with you, inquisitor.'

The reply that crackles in his helmet is just as composed. 'Thank you, Justicar Lyctus. It has been an honour serving with you. The Emperor protects.'



Chapter Sixteen

Two vast, etched iron gates loom over Sergeant Halser as he reaches the city walls. He looks up at the strange designs and sees stars, planets and galaxies whirling in a stylised storm. Far above, at the top of the walls he sees rows of pilgrims surveying the valley as it sinks into darkness, as uninterested in the Relictors as all the other pilgrims they have passed.

Frater Gortyn and their other guides reach the foot of the gate and wait without knocking. After a few seconds, the doors begin to swing slowly inwards, revealing a glimpse of bustling crowds and a wide, sweeping road.

The rest of the squad are still half a kilometre away. Sergeant Halser curses under his breath as he sees how slowly they are moving. Only the hunched, cowed figure of Pylcrafte has managed to keep up with him and he is staring at the city in abject horror. Brother Librarian Comus can barely walk and the others are matching their pace to his agonised steps. In an attempt to distract himself, Halser steps to the side of the road to examine Madrepore's soaring, rippling walls. The dusk is reflected in the countless rows of gems, embedded in the contorted rock. It is these crystals that give Madrepore its sparkle and, as he waits for the rest of the squad to arrive, Halser leans closer to examine one of them.

'By the Throne!' he grunts, turning to Pylcrafte. 'What *is* this?'

What he had mistaken for crystals are actually eyes. As Halser and Pylcrafte stagger back in disgust, they creak in their jagged sockets, rolling to watch them. Every one of them shimmers with an inner light, but they are unmistakably human. Halser looks over at Gortyn's scarred, empty sockets and howls. 'What sorcery is this? What have you done?'

Frater Gortyn's drawn features remain fixed in a vacant smile. 'There is no sorcery, Sergeant Halser. We have merely lent our vision to the prophet.' He taps

the star-shaped crystal lodged in his forehead. ‘We see so much further now.’

Sergeant Halser groans as he looks back at the banks of rolling, blinking eyes. He can bear this no longer. He draws his bolt pistol and levels it at Frater Gortyn. ‘This is unspeakable. If I had known—’

Halser’s words are drowned out by an explosion. The blast is so violent that the whole valley shakes, jolting the sergeant sideways and sending his gun clattering across the road.

Pylcrafte lets out a stream of curses as he topples backwards into a ditch.

Ignoring his cries for help, Halser and the pilgrims look back down the road in confusion. A huge plume of smoke is rolling down into the valley from the entrance to the catacombs and distant shapes are visible, moving quickly through the haze.

Frater Gortyn’s grin finally drops from his face. As a line of black-armoured figures begins pouring down into the valley, he slumps heavily against the city gates. ‘The enemy,’ he groans, turning to his fellow pilgrims. ‘How? How can they have found Madrepore?’

Sergeant Halser curses and snatches his gun from the road. ‘I thought you said your prophet kept them blind to this place?’

Frater Gortyn clutches his head in his hands as his brethren begin whining in fear. ‘He does. They are.’ He pauses and turns his head towards the sergeant. ‘Or, at least, they always have been.’ His voice becomes a hideous shriek. ‘*You’ve* led them to us! How else can this be?’

The other two pilgrims cease their whining and turn around, shaking their heads in shock. ‘It’s the only explanation,’ gasps one of them, pointing at Halser. ‘You’re in league with the Black Knights. You must be! You’ve betrayed Astraesus!’ He looks up at the faces looking out from the battlements. ‘We’re betrayed!’ he cries, pressing his mouth to the gap opening between the gates.

Halser backs away, keeping his gun trained on the wailing pilgrims. ‘How many?’ he breathes into his vox-bead, snatching a brief glimpse at the distant line of figures.

Brother Volter is the first to reply, his voice full of disbelief. ‘Sergeant, they must have been toying with us. Those small attacks must have been a feint.’

‘What do you mean?’ snaps Halser, still unable to take his eyes off the raving pilgrims.

‘There are hundreds of them, sergeant. I can’t even count the—’

The exchange is interrupted by another huge explosion and this time it is much closer. Halser staggers again and the pilgrims launch themselves at him.

He moves to shrug them off, but to his fury he feels a blinding pain in his forehead and words echoing beneath his scalp. ‘Betrayal!’ drone the voices, so loud that Halser cries out in pain.

‘Get out of my head!’ he roars, but the voices swell in volume, chanting the word ‘betrayal’ like a prayer as Halser drops, groaning, to his knees.

Blood erupts from his nose as the pilgrims continue their furious assault on his mind. He is vaguely aware that they are also thrashing uselessly against his power armour with their fists, but the external world is quickly slipping away from him as their prayers clamp around his agonised brain.

‘Comus,’ he manages to gasp as the pain overwhelms him.

Immediately he feels another presence in his thoughts, enveloping the wailing voices and easing the pain in his head. Before the agony has a chance to overpower him again, Halser rises to his feet and fires his bolt pistol, tearing a ragged hole through Frater Gortyn’s chest and sending him spinning across the road.

The other two pilgrims scramble for cover but he guns them down too, killing them before they can reach the gate and sending a fan of bright blood across the hammered iron.

Halser spins around and stares back down the road. The mountain looks as though it has sprung a black, glistening leak. Countless ranks of Traitor Marines are flooding down across the foothills and gathering on the road. He sees the gold trim on their spiked power armour, glinting as they charge towards the city.

‘The barn!’ he cries, waving to a low, stone building at the side of the road near his men. ‘Take cover! Volter, buy them time.’

The Relictors finally move with some speed. Two of them lift Comus from his feet and charge from the road with him while the rest dive for cover. At the same time, Brother Volter drops to one knee and brings his lascannon to bear on the approaching hordes. The far end of the road erupts in blue flames as he finds his mark. Tiny, black-clad figures spin into the air and for a moment the advance falters. Before they have chance to return fire, Brother Volter rolls across the road and drops into the roadside ditch.

Seconds later, the road where he knelt explodes like a lake in a hailstorm. Stone and shrapnel whines through the air as the enemy guns tear up the landscape.

As the Black Legion continue to race down the road, the Relictors hunker down by the barn and open fire. The enemy make no attempt to find cover and the air shimmers with the heat of the Relictors’ bolter fire.

The evening lights up again as Brother Volter fires a second shot with his lascannon, cutting another great hole in the advancing ranks.

As the wall behind him starts shattering under the enemy fire, Sergeant Halser clamps his helmet into place and looks from his men to the gates behind him. Through the gap he sees a stampede of white-robed figures as the pilgrims empty the streets and rush to defend the walls. 'What can they do?' he wonders aloud. Then he remembers the pain of Frater Gortyn's prayers, clawing at his thoughts.

'Comus,' he snaps, dragging the still cursing Pylcrafte from the ditch. 'I think I have a chance of reaching the scriptorium. The pilgrims will focus their attention on the Traitor Marines. Can you lend me your support if they try and stop me?'

The reply through the vox-bead is a hoarse, indecipherable grunt, but a clearer voice appears in the sergeant's thoughts. 'Be quick. There are too many of them for us to hold.'

'I think you may have help,' replies Halser, watching the pilgrims rushing to man Madrepore's battlements. He turns and addresses Pylcrafte. 'I'm going in. Stay and fight, or help me find the scriptorium.' Then, as the enemy fire grows in ferocity, he leans on one of the iron gates and shoves it back a few more centimetres, allowing himself enough room to squeeze thorough and enter the city.

The sight that greets him is bewildering. At the heart of the city is a huge fortified temple with a thick, hexagonal tower at its centre. Nestled around it are hundreds of other buildings, all constructed of the same, writhing, coral-like rock, and all glittering with rows of crystalline eyes. As the eyes roll and blink, the buildings shimmer, so that the city seems to be undulating with light, and the whole scene is shrouded in vast, drifting columns of moonlit cloud. The storms Halser saw from orbit seem to be emanating from this single point. The combination of glimmering eyes and writhing clouds is overwhelming. It looks as though Madrepore is carved from shifting, moonlit water.

Halser pauses for a second, trying to see a way through the pulsing clouds and milling, panic-stricken crowds. He hisses into his vox-bead: 'Which way, Comus? What do I do?'

'Head for the centre of the city,' comes a reply in his mind. 'The prophet has built his temple directly over the scriptorium. If anyone knows what happened to its contents, it will be him.' There is a pause, then Comus speaks through the vox-bead, his voice a ragged growl. 'I don't know how long I can keep them out

of your head, sergeant.'

Halser nods, but still hesitates, unsure how to proceed through the incredible display. Most of the pilgrims are charging to the walls, but hundreds are also racing down the wide road that leads from the gate to the temple.

'So many of them, and all damned,' mutters a trembling voice at Halser's side and he remembers the inquisitor's acolyte is still with him. Pylcrafte is waving his cane at the shifting clouds, as though he can ward off the corruption surrounding him.

The sergeant turns to speak, but before he can, a huge section of wall explodes just above the gate. The air fills with screams and spinning chunks of masonry and, to Halser's delight, the road ahead clears, as the pilgrims scramble for cover.

'Keep close,' he cries, charging down the road.

As he approaches the temple walls he sees a long building to his left, topped with a huge stone star and crowded with pilgrims. Many of them have stopped to watch him and, even with Comus shielding his thoughts, he starts to feel their furious prayers battering against his mind. He tries to ignore them and focus on reaching the doors to the temple, but as he does so, he stumbles to a halt.

He is back at the city gates, looking down at Pylcrafte.

'So many of them, and all damned,' says the hooded figure, waving his cane.

Halser curses and shakes his head, trying to rid himself of his confusion.

'What is happening?' he cries. 'I keep seeing the same thing, over and over.'

He hears the voice of Comus in his head again. 'Sergeant. The power of this Astraeus is like nothing I've ever felt. I think time itself is bending to his will.' He pauses. 'Or maybe not even that. It feels almost as though time is collapsing.'

Halser groans in frustration. 'By the Throne, Comus. What are you talking about?'

There is no reply and Halser vents his frustration on the city wall, slamming his armoured fist into the rock and shattering a cluster of blinking eyes. Then he tries again, racing off towards the temple with Pylcrafte stumbling after him, still cursing and muttering into his hood.

Brother-Librarian Comus lies bleeding in a ditch. Bolter fire rattles and whines overhead but he is only vaguely aware of it. All his attention is fixed on the small, metal-bound book clutched in his hand. He remembers the first time he handled the xenos device, given to him by Inquisitor Mortmain, all those years ago. It took months of fierce, uninterrupted prayer before he would even

consider opening his mind to such unholy, alien sentience. He was sure of his purpose then: to glean what he could whilst keeping his mind intact. But now what does he feel? The thing is killing him, he is sure of that. Every time he allows those luminous characters to flood his mind, he feels a little more of his soul being torn away. Even on a purely psychical level the effect is obvious: he has been bleeding heavily from his nose and mouth since they arrived on Ilissus and, without the aid of his battle-brothers, he can barely stand. However, that is not the worst of it. The thing that fills him with dread is that the libellus no longer feels so alien. It no longer feels wrong. It is becoming part of him. Comus draws himself upright and closes the book with a shudder. What is he becoming?

He turns to the Relictor crouched next to him in the ditch. Brother Borellus has his bolter balanced on the scorched earth and his shoulder is jerking back as he fires round after round down the road, picking off the advancing traitors with medical precision. For a second, Comus cannot recall exactly how they got there.

‘Where are the others?’ he groans, wiping the blood from his eyes.

Brother Borellus holds fire for a second but does not turn around. ‘Brothers Sabine and Thaler are just behind you, further down the ditch. Strasser, Vortimer and Brunman are holed up in the barn, although they’ve taken some heavy hits. Volter is on the far side of the road.’ A note of pride enters his voice. ‘His lascannon is giving them pause for thought.’ He fires off another few rounds, muttering happily to himself as more of the traitors spin back into the clouds. ‘And Sergeant Halser has entered the city, with Inquisitor Mortmain’s servant, but...’ He looks down at the Librarian briefly, his voice hesitant. ‘...you know that.’

Comus nods, relieved that Borellus’s words make sense. He cannot help but notice, though, that his battle-brother’s Low Gothic seems unusually crude and clumsy. He realises, to his horror, that he is comparing it unfavourably to the alien language that has embedded itself in his thoughts. Anger knots his stomach. Why should they have to endure this? Why should they have to prove themselves after so many long centuries of service and so many sacrifices in the Emperor’s name? He shakes his head and looks back along the ditch. As Borellus stated, there are another two Relictors crouched behind him firing steadily into the oncoming ranks. Above them, further down the road, rise the walls of Madrepore and its shimmering, hexagonal tower. Prove them wrong, Sergeant Halser, he thinks, grasping one of the religious texts chained to his power armour. Show them what we are worth.



Chapter Seventeen

As Inquisitor Mortmain marches through the *Domitus*, he draws the billhook from his belt. The black metal blinks red under the flashing lights as he strides through the corridors, swinging it back and forth, testing the weight of the blade in his hand. Crude script runs down its centre: words too vile for even an inquisitor to study. As he reaches a shattered door he pauses, listening to what he hopes is the sound of vast, thermonuclear weapons powering up. But the ship is shaking so violently he cannot be sure if he is hearing the result of his orders or the sound of the approaching daemon.

‘Cerbalus,’ he breathes, wondering if he has the strength to face the coming encounter. He is an old man, and all the faith in the galaxy cannot match the fury of youth. The officers on the bridge have their orders and they will work fast, but he will still need to buy them time. The inquisitor casts his mind back through the decades to the day he bound Cerbalus to his will. On the scorched earth of Azoras he and his brothers faced the monster down, armed with powerful, ancient wards and a bitter chorus of litanies. But the cabal that saved Azoras is no more. Inquisitors Medeon, Orium and Shaaraim are long dead. This time he must face the beast alone. Even his old friend Sergeant Halser will soon be gone: torn apart by a firestorm of Mortmain’s own creation.

Mortmain looks down at the capital I emblazoned across his breastplate. Youth is gone. Friendship is gone. Faith will have to suffice. He kicks the broken door, scattering the blackened metal across the heaving corridor and strides into the next chamber. He enters a pillar-lined cloister, so wide and tall it seems as though he has stepped out into a stormy, summer’s evening. The air is cloying, thick and sulphurous. Ancient, beautiful mosaics are tumbling from the walls, exploding across the flagstones like brittle, enamelled rain.

At the far end of the central colonnade there is a shape. It is no more than a

shadow amongst shadows, but Mortmain knows his prey. Evil seeps from it like smoke. The inquisitor peers through the darkness, straining to make out details, but the shadow shifts and ripples across the floor, liquid and supple.

There is still hope, thinks Mortmain. The idea surprises him, but once loosed from his subconscious it grows in certainty. ‘There *is* hope,’ he breathes, realising that the daemon is bodiless; it has no host. Its vile presence has been set loose by Justicar Lyctus and his Grey Knights, and without a physical home it will soon be dragged into the immaterium, folded back into the shifting hell that spawned it.

The shadow elongates and drifts down the colonnade, assuming a fixed shape only when it is a few metres away. It adopts the form of a man; or, at least, something resembling a man. It towers over Mortmain, three metres tall and topped by the head of a diseased, slick-feathered carrion crow. As the daemon steps closer, it spreads a pair of ink-black wings and two scrawny arms, delighting in the destruction it has wrought. ‘Do you think, master,’ it asks in an amiable tone, ‘that, after all these years of service, I might request something in return?’

Mortmain gives no reply, stepping sideways between the columns, passing the billhook from hand to hand. He knows his pistol would only feed the thing’s strength, but the blade has secrets even Cerbalus does not share.

‘Come now,’ laughs the daemon. ‘Is it so much to ask?’ Its form breaks apart and reassembles itself behind Mortmain, causing him to whirl around and adopt a fighting stance. ‘Think of the squalid deeds I have performed at your request. Think of the blood on my hands that should have been on yours. Surely I deserve a little thanks? A little recompense?’

Mortmain backs carefully away. There *is* hope, he thinks again as he notices an edge to the daemon’s voice. Despite its attempt to sound calm, he senses an undercurrent of emotion. Decades of interrogation have honed his senses until he can discern even the subtlest hints of fear, or anger. As he circles the daemon, Mortmain realises that he has one final weapon: the daemon hates him, hates him with a passion that could even blind it to anything else.

‘You think I would let your vile presence pollute the body of an Imperial inquisitor?’ Mortmain’s voice is as calm and even as the daemon’s. Suddenly he feels as though his entire life has been building to this moment, this single test of his will. Can he keep the daemon distracted long enough for the crew to launch the attack on Ilissus? Can he play one final trick on a servant of the greatest trickster of them all? ‘Try me, Cerbalus!’ he roars, relishing the look of shock in

the daemon's avian eyes. 'I will take you down, daemon! Send you back to the pit you crawled out of!'

Cerbalus's huge, ragged wings droop and it tilts its head to one side, surprised to find the old man in such a defiant mood.

Before the daemon has chance to reply, Mortmain snaps a syllable so coarse and guttural he has to spit it out with a grimace. As he speaks, the first of the glyphs carved into his billhook blazes with light and he attacks with surprising speed, slashing the blade through the daemon's leg before it has chance to recoil.

Cerbalus screeches. The sound slices through the cacophony, shrill and hideous as it echoes around the towering columns. 'How?' it whines, scrabbling back into the darkness, tearing up flagstones with its clawed feet.

'How?' cries Mortmain. 'How can I hurt you like that?' He swings the billhook from side to side, flinging inky blood into the shadows as he advances on the huge, cowering shape. The first character on the blade is still aflame with the force of his oath, and as he advances he spits out another contorted syllable. As the sound leaves his lips, a second glyph pulses into life and Mortmain leaps forwards, hacking another chunk out of the daemon's leg.

Cerbalus wails in pain and shock and, with a beat of its enormous wings, hurls itself up towards the distant, ribbed vaults of the ceiling.

'Your name, daemon!' Mortmain's voice is a deep, victorious howl. 'I did not share everything with you! Do you think I have been idle all these long decades? Do you think I never foresaw this moment?' The inquisitor climbs on the shattered stump of a marble column and levels the billhook at the shape hovering overhead. 'Face me, abomination! Or are you afraid?'

Cerbalus swoops across the chamber and wraps its shifting form around one of the pillars, several metres above Mortmain. At the word 'afraid' its bird-like head snaps around and glares at the inquisitor. 'Afraid?' it screeches. Its rage is so great that its form shifts through dozens of shapes, trembling and flickering in and out of view. 'You are nothing! You are the lapdog of a puppet corpse. How can you even look at me? You are an insect!'

The lights in the chamber dim as a grinding, deafening hum rumbles through the walls.

The daemon snaps its head in the other direction, peering at the broken door. 'You have already begun,' it whispers. 'Exterminatus.'

The chamber lurches to one side and Mortmain is forced to grab a pillar to steady himself. 'Go, then, daemon,' he cries. 'You will find nothing but pain here.'

Cerbalus looks back at the inquisitor, its eyes full of dark fire. ‘What would you know of pain?’ The daemon launches itself from the pillar, ripples through the darkness and materialises next to Mortmain.

Before the inquisitor can raise his billhook, a ragged, filthy claw slices through his leather cloak and sends him flying across the room in a spray of blood. He slams into a pillar with a howl of pain and scrambles away into the darkness, cursing under his breath.

Cerbalus spins on the spot, spreading its wings and arching its long neck as it laughs with pleasure, forgetting everything but the ecstasy of revenge.

Mortmain staggers from pillar to pillar, his head spinning. Once he reaches the far side of the chamber he pulls back the shreds of his cloak to reveal an arm that is equally torn. His left bicep is completely ruined, hanging from his tattered flesh like raw steak. As the daemon continues spinning through the shadows, laughing to itself, Mortmain tears a strip of leather from his cloak and ties a quick tourniquet. He still has the glowing billhook in his right hand, and as he taps it against his breastplate he is relieved to feel that it is still intact. Without the prayers and sigils worked into its ornate metal, the mere presence of the daemon would split his mind as thoroughly as his ruined arm.

Suddenly the laughter is right next to him, but this time Mortmain is ready. He rolls clear of the daemon’s claws and chants a third, potent syllable, lighting up another character on his weapon.

Cerbalus cringes at the sound, but before it can withdraw its claw, Mortmain chops down with the billhook, slicing another piece of the daemon and causing it to screech in pain and frustration.

This time it does not flee, though. Before Mortmain can draw breath for another letter, the daemon stoops low over him and a talon rips open his thigh, sending him toppling to the ground. The pain is like nothing he has ever experienced but, as he slams onto the floor, he manages to gasp another syllable and lash out with the billhook.

Cerbalus croaks and gurgles as the blade rips open its throat.

By now the inquisitor’s black weapon is alive with flaming characters. ‘I have your name!’ howls Mortmain, attempting to disguise the lie by screaming it with all the force he can muster. ‘I will banish you, Cerbalus! You have no place here!’

The daemon’s twisted, stooping form backs away from him, clutching at the wound in its throat, unable to comprehend how the inquisitor’s weapon could sever flesh that does not even exist. ‘My name? How could you?’

The lights dip again as another deafening rumble fills the chamber.

Almost there, thinks Mortmain. Just a few more minutes.

The daemon looks at the doorway, its head twitching with indecision. It looks in the direction of the *Domitus's* bridge, then back at the gore-splattered man writhing at its feet. It peers suspiciously at the short, curved blade pulsing in Mortmain's grip, trying to make out the characters that have yet to ignite. 'You do not have the power to wield such a thing. If my name were really held in that piece of metal it would tear your mind open.'

Knowing that he only has to maintain the lie for a few more minutes, Mortmain screams another syllable and attempts to stab Cerbalus again.

The daemon beats its wings and disappears.

Mortmain's broken body floods with adrenaline at the thought that the daemon has given up on him and made for the bridge. Then he sees it reappear, crouched like a gargoyle on the broken pillar where he was standing a few minutes earlier.

'My flesh is not for one such as you!' he cries, spraying blood across his breastplate. He tries to stand, but his leg collapses beneath him and he sprawls across the flagstones like a drunk. 'Try me, Cerbalus. Just a few more characters and you will be in my power once more.'

Cerbalus lets out a scream that even drowns out the klaxons. It launches itself from the pillar, smashing headlong into the inquisitor and sending them both tumbling across the bloody flagstones.

As they roll, Mortmain continues crying out the foul syllables and hacking into the daemon's shifting flesh, even as Cerbalus's frenzied claws tear his body apart.

Finally, they come to a halt against the feet of a statue and Mortmain begins to laugh.

'You are mine!' screams the daemon, lifting the inquisitor up into the air by the throat and shaking him like a broken toy.

Mortmain continues to laugh even as his innards spill to the floor. The chamber is shaking more violently than ever as the *Domitus's* weapons silos finally launch their missiles at Ilissus.

'Perhaps you will have me after all, Cerbalus,' he laughs, vaguely aware that silver-clad figures are emerging from the shadows, their weapons trained on the daemon. 'But you will never have Ilissus.'

Far below, the planet's surface flashes red, then purple, then a beautiful opalescent white as it begins to die.



Chapter Eighteen

The temple of Astraeus is the grandest of follies. As Halser races through the great hall its walls swoop and bulge around him like the sails of a ship. Every inch of the place – floor, ceiling and walls – is studded with thousands of eyes, all of which follow the sergeant as he pounds towards the archway at the far end. The windows have been constructed in such a way that stars appear to hang in the air, and the dervish-like eddies of dust and cloud are even more fierce inside the building: waltzing and swaying like dancers across the floor, merging seamlessly with the undulating walls. It seems to Halser that he has been cut adrift in the heavens, and as he runs he weaves drunkenly from side to side, disorientated by the extraordinary display.

‘Heresy!’ whines Pylcrafte, stumbling after him and firing shots at the walls with his laspistol, shattering as many of the blinking eyes as he can. ‘Heresy, heresy, heresy, heresy, heresy!’ He has his cane in his other hand and he tries to stab the rolling clouds, hacking and lunging like a deranged swordsman.

Halser ignores him and keeps running towards the archway.

‘He’s going to unfetter us.’ Comus’s pain is clear to Halser, even over the vox. ‘Whatever he’s doing, it’s going to unhinge time.’

‘I don’t understand!’ cries Halser, reaching the archway and leaning against the stone to catch his breath.

‘Ilissus is heading towards some kind of time loop. Maybe even the whole sector. Whoever this prophet is, you need to stop him.’ There is an uncharacteristic note of fear in the Librarian’s voice. ‘You have to kill him, sergeant. The Black Legion want him to succeed. They have only attacked now to stop us hindering him. They could have struck at any time. He is *dangerous*, Halser. More than I guessed. Maybe he doesn’t even realise it himself.’

Halser shakes his head and stumbles into the next chamber. ‘A time loop? I

don't understand.' The room he has entered is a vast, glass-roofed atrium, surrounding the hexagonal tower at the heart of the temple. Most of the pilgrims have fled to the walls to launch whatever strange defence they can manage, but a few are leaving the tower as Halser approaches. They drop to their knees and start screaming, horrified by his presence in their inner sanctum. The sergeant gasps and reels backwards. Their screamed prayers fill his head like a sickness. The pain snatches his breath and he stumbles, gasping inside his helmet, unable to breathe. He drops to his knees, feeling unconsciousness looming. Before he blacks out, he fires his bolt pistol. The shots are wild and frenzied, but one of the pilgrims crumples to the floor and the pain lessens. Feeling stronger, Halser manages to stand and fire off a few more shots. The pilgrims make no attempt to flee and it takes seconds to kill them. Then he staggers on, feeling his mouth filling with blood.

Pylcrafte staggers after him, waving his cane at nothing as he goes, trying to strike the prayers that fill the air.

Halser does not pause as he passes the pilgrims' corpses and enters the tower. He sees a wide, serpentine, spiral staircase and begins to climb. His mind is numb with pain. He can barely remember his purpose, beyond a fierce drive to reach the architect who summoned this nightmarish temple into being. As he climbs the stairs more of the pilgrims launch attacks on his mind, but he guns them down without even pausing, haunted by Comus's ominous term: 'time loop'.

'Pull back to the city!' cries Comus, staggering through the shrapnel and smoke, and pointing his force sword at the walls of Madrepore. 'We have to buy Halser some time. We can hold them at the gates!'

The barn has become a smouldering crater. Brothers Strasser, Vortimer and Brunman are dead. The remnants of their power armour is scattered throughout the rubble, torn open by the enemy's heavy artillery. There are five Relictors left to make the run. Brothers Sabine and Thaler help Comus while Borellus and Volter give them covering fire.

After a few minutes, Volter lowers his lascannon and races down the road after them, but Borellus remains crouched in a ditch, firing blast after blast with his bolter.

'Borellus!' snaps Comus as he reaches the relative safety of the city. 'Move!' Brother Borellus shakes his head and continues firing.

Volter reaches the gates and rolls clear as a storm of bolter fire follows him

into the city.

Comus jerks to one side as a hole explodes in the wall next to him. Then he peers briefly through it and sees that Borellus is still in the ditch, firing as calmly as ever, despite the fact that the enemy ranks are almost on him.

‘Borellus,’ he repeats, but there is no command in his voice now, only respect.

Borellus nods calmly in reply, then vanishes from view as the black-clad figures swarm over the ditch.

Comus hears a brief cough of pain over the vox as the Traitor Marines tear Borellus apart, and he lowers his head in prayer. Then he looks around the city. Hundreds, if not thousands of pilgrims are gathered on the city walls. He can feel the weight of their prayers as they try to repel the attacking army. And he can also feel their panic as they realise their words are having no effect.

‘They could have killed you at any time,’ he mutters, his voice full of disgust. ‘But they wanted your prophet to complete his work as much as you did.’ Then he notices a low, flat-roofed building to the left of the gates, with thick walls and small windows. He waves his force sword at the building and staggers towards it, ignoring the sound of enemy fire pulverising the city walls.

The other three Relictors sprint after him.

By the time Halser reaches the top of the stairs his mind is like that of an animal closing in on its prey, blind to everything but the chase. The City of Stars is collapsing but all he can think of is the prophet. He can barely remember why, but he knows he must stop *Astraeus*, even if it means his life.

Ahead of him is a tall, white door, studded with the same rolling eyes that line the walls. He pauses for a second and looks at them; blue, grey and brown irises look back, filled with terror and hate. *Hate*. Suddenly Halser remembers something other than the prophet of *Ilissus*. He remembers every doubt, rumour and lie that has been levelled at his beloved Chapter. An involuntary growl rolls deep in his chest and he shoves the door open, entering the central chamber.

The scene that greets him is strange enough to halt him in his steps. Pilgrims line the walls, kneeling in the five corners of a room built in the shape of a star, and the object of their genuflection is even more peculiar than they are. The man that Halser assumes is the prophet is as tall as a Space Marine, but where Halser is an armour-clad hulk of muscle, the prophet is a grey, emaciated wraith of a man, draped in voluminous black robes that hide most of his skeletal frame. His flesh is the colour of rain clouds and his limbs and hands are oddly elongated.

The fingers clutching the arms of his ornate throne resemble pale spider's legs; they are also webbed, like those of a lizard and end in long, crimson talons. Strangest of all is his head. It is swollen to three times the size of a normal skull and it is contained within a spherical, liquid-filled bowl. His eyes are barely visible behind thick, tinted goggles that also cover most of his forehead, and his pallid skull is pierced by a forest of thick wires that emerge from the glass helmet and connect to a bewildering collection of measuring devices: brass sextants, compasses and spinning, ticking depth gauges are all piled on the glass bowl like a rusty crown.

Despite everything he has seen on Ilissus, the sight of the prophet leaves Halser speechless. Everything strange about the planet clearly emanates from this one, bizarre figure. The coils of cloud that spread from the temple to the heavens are all trailing from his swollen, smiling face.

It takes Pylcrafte, stumbling into the room a few moments later, to state the undeniable truth. 'You—you're a Navigator,' he stammers, as his nest of cables snake from his hood to focus on the prophet.

Astraeus smiles, eliciting a chorus of sighs from his subjects. 'I used to be.' His voice sounds odd and distant, muffled by the liquid in his helmet, and as he speaks the air in the chamber ripples like heat haze. 'I was once Iarbonel van Tol, the first son of Baron Cornelius van Tol. But that was a long time ago, and I have a suspicion I might have been disinherited. The Emperor has a better name for me now, though, and a far greater purpose.' He fixes his gaze on Halser. As the light in the chamber swells, his eyes become visible behind the lenses of his goggles.

Halser forgets his purpose for a moment, hypnotised by the prophet's stare, then he shakes his head and recalls the words of Comus. 'What are you doing here?' he snaps, waving his gun at the rolling clouds and the banks of eyes. 'What sorcery is this?'

The prophet's smile falters. He frowns, clearly surprised by the accusation of sorcery. 'I have watched you from afar, Space Marine,' he says. 'I thought you at least would understand.'

Halser continues shaking his head, too confused to answer.

'When the Emperor cast me down onto Ilissus I thought He had abandoned me.' The prophet waves at the ceiling. 'My beloved ship was utterly destroyed.'

Halser looks up and notices Imperial designs, warped into the strange architecture, as though the whole place has been grown from the carcass of a battleship.

‘My injuries were horrendous,’ he turns his head slightly revealing the signs of crude, brutal surgery on the back of his skull, ‘but my children kept me safe.’ He smiles at the adoring pilgrims. ‘Over time, I realised the damage to my brain had untapped my true potential. That is all you are seeing here, sergeant: the *true* potential of a loyal subject.’ He flexes his fingers and the air ripples visibly, like water. ‘Soon I will have the power to crush those who would oppose us.’ His voice grows higher in pitch. ‘I will be invincible.’

Halser grips his bolt pistol tighter as he remembers his goal. He must stop this deluded monster before he tears the whole galaxy apart with his witchcraft. He raises his gun and mutters a prayer, but before he can fire, the temple lurches to one side.

The pilgrims’ prayers become a scream of terror as the walls start to bulge and sag.

‘It is beginning,’ smiles the prophet, leaning his head forwards so that the glass bowl touches Halser’s gun with a *clink*. ‘Your friends have sent you to your death. They want us to die together.’

Halser gasps. ‘You’re a liar!’ he cries, but as he speaks he recognises the scale of the explosions. He snatches the chronograph at his belt. ‘I still have time!’ He looks at the crumbling walls in disbelief. ‘Mortmain would not do this to me!’

The prophet nods. ‘They fear courage more than anything. My own father has sent them to kill me. And you...’ He pauses. ‘They sent you here to die, my friend. Your death, by my side, will be their final proof. Now they will speak openly the word they have long whispered against you: heretic.’



I am betrayed, thinks Sergeant Halser. *Betrayed*.

‘Comus is down!’ howls Brother Volter over the vox. ‘Dead, maybe... I—I can’t be sure. They’ve taken the infirmary. I’m pulling back. What are your orders? Sergeant?’ His voice is broken, his words half-buried beneath the sound of artillery. ‘Are you there? Sergeant Halser?’

Halser keeps his gun pressed to the prophet’s head and gives no reply. The pilgrims scream at him from the shadows, but he keeps his gaze fixed on a pair of grotesque, fathomless eyes.

The prophet stares back.

Halser places his finger on the trigger.

‘I can save both of us,’ says the prophet. His head lolls inside his bowl-shaped helmet, suspended by a pale, thin neck and a gloop of viscous liquid. The solution distorts his voice, but he tries to contort his vowels into something more human, enunciating each word carefully as though speaking to a child. He points a long, webbed finger at the man in the doorway. ‘They’ve lied to you. They have murdered us both. They knew *exactly* what would happen. They have *always* known.’

Halser follows his gaze and sees to his horror that Gideon Pylcrafte is laughing. No mouth is visible beneath his black hood, just a quivering mass of cables, but his amusement is clear. Halser’s resolve evaporates. His hand falters. If Pylcrafte saw this coming, the whole mission was a lie. Halser tries to marshal his thoughts. He tries to pray, but the sound of Brother Volter’s pain knives into him, merged with the wailing of the pilgrims. The artillery grows louder until it seems the whole valley is groaning. The noise is unbearable and too loud to be just heavy guns. As the blasts ring around his head, Halser is forced to accept the truth.

The orbital bombardment *has* already begun.

Without Comus’s protection, his mind edges quickly towards collapse. The

temporal distortion has reached its zenith and the pilgrims' voices claw at his thoughts like blades across metal. He cannot be sure what is now and what was then. Simultaneously, he is leading the squad through the catacombs, slaughtering the pilgrims at the city gates and reaching the inner temple, but he knows that has already been. He stares deeper into the prophet's misshapen eyes, trying to anchor himself.

'Comus is down!' howls Brother Volter over the vox. 'Dead, maybe... I—I can't be sure. They've taken the infirmary. I'm pulling back. What are your orders? Sergeant?'

Halser curses and looks back at the doorway. Time is collapsing. He has heard those words before, but how many times?

'I will *not* let you live,' he snaps, turning back to the prophet. The metallic ring of his amplified voice booms around the chamber. 'You're an abomination.'

The prophet's bloated skull drifts to one side and splits open in a grin. 'You have a ship and I have vision. The clouds are no barrier to me.' He waves at Pylcrafte. 'He's wronged us both. Why should we accept our fate? We are the elect few. We have great work ahead of us. Great deeds.'

Halser shakes his head, but there is doubt kindling in his eyes. To shoot the prophet means death. Worse than that, it means failure. But what is the alternative? After everything he has seen, how could he let such a man live?

The prophet brushes his elongated fingers against Halser's power armour. They trace around a filigreed skull and he narrows his eyes. 'Why did you come to Madrepore, *Relictor*?'

The chamber lurches and the ground shifts. The enemy fire is closing in. Centuries-old marble tumbles from the vaulted ceiling. Ten-metre eagles splinter and crack, covering the floor with vast, broken wings.

'Behold, the immutable will of the Emperor!' cries Pylcrafte from the doorway, raising his voice over the cacophony. 'You're a proud fool, Sergeant Halser. This is all on your head. This is the price you pay for all your lowly, creeping misbelief and your repeated use of xenos—'

Halser silences him with a shot to the head. The blast echoes around the chamber and Pylcrafte crumples in a plume of blood. The cables in his hood twitch for a few seconds longer, then he lies still.

Halser turns away and presses his bolt pistol back against the prophet's helmet. 'You're a mutant.'

'And what are you, *Relictor*?' The prophet's glass helmet is now splattered with Pylcrafte's blood but his voice remains defiant. He waves at the network of

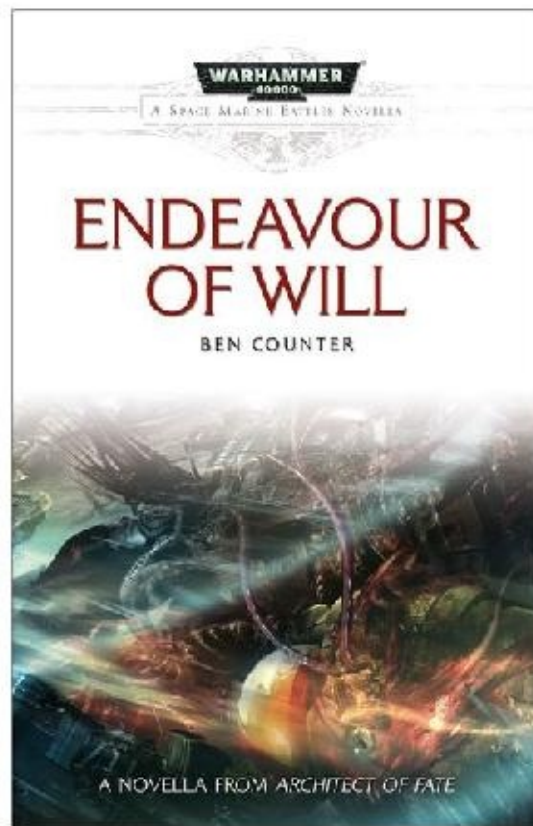
passageways that lead off from his throne room. ‘There are weapons here. Weapons we could *use*.’ His voice grows softer. ‘They lied to you, Relictor. All of them. Your fidelity is misplaced, don’t you see?’

Halser grimaces as the agonised chorus grows louder: Brother Volter’s desperate requests for orders, the chanting of the pilgrims, the groaning of the earth, the pounding of the guns. But worse than the noise is the doubt. How could Mortmain have tricked him? As the question torments Halser, the doubt turns to rage. Even his oldest friend does not believe in him, does not believe in his Chapter. He and his men have been sent to their deaths. Perhaps the braver act would be to listen to the prophet? ‘I will prove you wrong, Mortmain,’ he spits. ‘I will make you *pay*.’

As his fury grows, the *déjà vu* becomes unbearable. The prophet’s words loop around the chamber, growing louder with each repetition. Halser’s indecision grows and lights blossom in his head, merging with the crystals in the walls and the glyphs rolling across his visor. He sees a corona of sunlight around Ilissus, shimmering like spun gold as he breaks orbit and drops down into the storm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darius Hinks's first novel, *Warrior Priest*, won the David Gemmell Morningstar award for best newcomer. Since then he's become one of the Black Library's most prolific and popular authors, writing a whole swathe of novels, novellas and short stories set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. His recent works include the Warhammer Heroes novel *Sigvald* and 'Sanctus', a novella included in the Space Marine Battles anthology *Architect of Fate*.



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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

**Published in 2011 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

Cover illustration by Jon Sullivan

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ISBN 978-0-85787-252-4

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